October
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THE ® saint MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

The Meaning of the Act
by MARGERY ALLINGHAM

Dying Room Only
by STEWART STERLING

The Galloping Bandits
by GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT

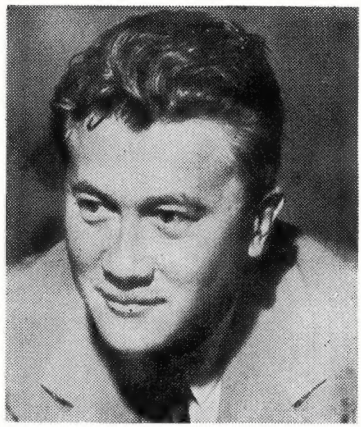
Murder Masquerade
by LAWRENCE TREAT

The Rhine Maiden
by LESLIE CHARTERIS

The Poker Player's Wife

A A NEW STORY by CORNELL WOOLRICH

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION



If the poet Robert Burns had been composing today the famous ode which begins:

"Wee sleekit cowerin' timorous beastie. . ."

I think he might have dedicated it not to a mouse, as he did, but to the average editor, producer, or sponsor of public entertainment. For there can be no beasties more timorous, before the mere prospect of any crackpot protest, or more swift to cower before the first indignant letter, being constitutionally unable to grasp the obvious fact that one squawker makes more noise than ninetynine other members of the audience who see nothing to squawk about.

To this craven surrender to censorship by bleat we owe the virtual disappearance today of the good clean fun of dialect comedians, who are now supposed to offend the Jewish, German, Italian, Scottish, or other "minorities" whom they caricature. In their place we have the "sick" humorists, whose jokes may be as morbid as you like provided they are delivered in standard English.

This pressure is particularly hard on the purveyors of mystery and adventure, since it is unfortunately impossible to have a crime without a criminal, and a criminal has got to have some name and some background. But you have only to make him a Negro, a Japanese, a Slav, or any kind of Latin, to be instantly deluged with invective from self-appointed champions of whatever racial or national group is alleged to have been thereby libelled *en masse* as bad citizens. It has practically reached the point in television and movies where the only safe villain to pick on is an Anglo-Saxon Protestant preferably named Smith — and even then there is some risk that the Smiths may organize to resent that.

The result, that by sentence of these hypersensitive minorities the Anglo-Saxon Protestants are arbitrarily condemned to bear the guilt for every imaginary job of skullduggery, seems to leave unmoved the tender hearts of those fanatics for a fair portrayal of everybody else.

The editorship of this Magazine refuses to bow to the squeals of such idiotic touchiness. Whenever necessary, we shall present both heroes and heavies of any ethnic origin, equally indiscriminately, which is how they occur in real life. So don't ever waste time and paper and a stamp to register a beef which will not bother us in the least. We may be wee, but we are not sleekit.

Ever Charlie

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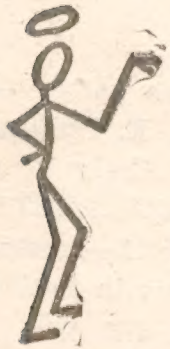

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Leslie Charteris
Supervising Editor

Hans Stefan Santesson
Editor

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the rhine maiden

by . . . Leslie Charteris

Simon Templar was never influenced by sentiment — he always said . . .

Simon Templar always thought of her as the Rhine Maiden for the simple reason that he met her on his way down the Rhine. He had never found the time or the inclination to sit through Wagner's epic on the subject, but he surmised that the Rhine Maidens of the operas would probably have been in keeping with the usual run of half-pint Siegfrieds and 200-pound Brunnhildes. The girl on the train was what Simon, in a mood of poetic fancy, would have liked a Rhine Maiden to be; and he didn't care whether she could sing top F or not.

Simon took the train because he had made the trip from Cologne to Mainz by boat before, and had announced himself a Philistine unimpressed. Reluctantly, he had summarised that much-advertised river as an enormous quantity of muddy water flowing northwards at tremendous speed under a litter of black barges and tugboats and pleasure steamers, with a few crumbling ruins on its banks shouldering awkwardly between clumps of factory chimneys. Scenically, it had

THE RHINE IS A RIVER OF EPICS. HOW COULD THE SAINT HAVE TRAVELED IT WITHOUT ADDING AN INCIDENT TO HIS OWN SAGA?

From: Leslie Charteris' THE SAINT IN EUROPE
Copyright 1954 by Leslie Charteris

been scanned and found wanting by the keen and gay blue eyes that had reflected every great river in the world from the Nile to the Amazon, even though he found the ruins a little pitiful, as if they had only asked to be left in the peace of years and had been refused. Also Simon took the train because it was quicker, and he had unlawful business to conclude in Stuttgart; which was perhaps the best reason of all.

For the saga of any adventurer take this: an idea, a scheme, action, danger, escape, and perhaps a surprise somewhere. Repeat indefinitely, with irregular interludes of quiet. Flavour it with the eternal discontent of unattainable horizons, and the everlasting content of an eagle's freedom. That had been Simon Templar's life since the day when he was first nicknamed the Saint; and it was his one prayer that he might be spared many years more in which to demonstrate the peculiar brand of saintliness which he had made his own. With valuable property burgled from an unsavoury ex-collaborationist's house near Paris in his valise, and his fare paid out of a wallet picked from the pocket of a waiter who had made the mistake of being rude to him, the Saint lighted a cigarette and leaned back in his corner to be innocently glad that the lottery of travel could shuffle a girl like that into the compartment chosen by the voyaging buccaneer.

She was very young—about seventeen or eighteen, he guessed—and her eyes were the bright greenish-blue that the waters of the Rhine ought to have been. She had pulled off her hat when she sat down, so that the unstudied symmetry of her curving honey-blonde hair framed her face in a careless aureole. She was beautiful. But there was something more to her than her mere unspoiled young beauty, something strange and startling that he could not define. She was the fairy princess that no man ever meets except in his most youthful dreams, the Cinderella that every man looks for all his life and knows he will never find. She was the woman that each man marries, only to find that he saw nothing but the mirror of his own hopes. And even when he had said that, the Saint knew that he had touched only a crude outline—that there was still something more which he might never be able to say. But because there seemed to be nothing of immediate importance in the newspaper he had bought at the station, and because even a lawless adventurer may find his own pleasure in the enjoyment of simple loveliness, Simon Templar leaned back with the smoke drifting past his eyes and wove romantic fantasies about the Rhine Maiden and the old man who was with her.

"This is der most vonderful

river of der whole vorld, Greta," said the old man, gazing out of the window. "For der Danube der is a valtz; but this is der only river in der vorld dot has four operas written about it. Some day you shall see it all properly, Gretchen—die Lorelei, und Ehrenbreitstein, und all kinds of vonderful places——"

An adventurer lives on impulse, riding the crest of life only because he takes the wave in the split second where others hesitate. The Saint said, quietly and naturally, with a slight movement of his hand: "I think there's some better stuff over that way. Over around the Eifel."

The other two both looked at him; and the happy eyes of the solid old man lighted up.

"Ach, so you know your Chermany!"

Simon wondered what they would have said if he had explained that the police of two nations had once hunted him up from Innsbruck through Munich to Treuchtlingen and beyond, on a certain adventure that was one of his blithest memories; but he only smiled.

"I've been here before."

"I know dot country, too," said the old man eagerly, with his soft German-American accent faltering a little in his throat. "When I vos a boy we used to try and catch fish in der river at Gemund; and vonce I got lost by myself in der voods going over to Heimbach. Now I hear der is a great *Thalsperre,* a big dam dot makes all der valley into a great lake. So maybe der is some fish there now."

It was as if he had suddenly met an old friend; the sluicegates of memory were opened at a touch, and the old man let them flow, stumbling through his words with the same naive happiness as he must have stumbled through the woods and streams he spoke of as a boy. There were many places that the Saint also knew; and a nod of recognition here and there was almost as much encouragement as the old man needed. His whole life story, commonplace at it was, came pattering out with a childish zest that was almost frightening in its godlike simplicity. Simon listened, and was queerly moved.

" . . . Und so I vork and vork, und I safe money and look after my little Greta, und she looks after me, und we are very happy. Und then at last I can retire mit a little money, not much, but plenty for us; und Greta is grown up."

The eyes of the old man shone with a serenity that was blinding, the eyes of a man who had never known the doubts and the fretfulness of his age, whose humble faith had passed utterly and incredibly unscathed through the squalid brawl of civilization perhaps because he had never been aware of it.

"So now we come back to

der Faderland to see my brother dot is a policeman in Mainz. Und Greta is going to see der vorld, und buy herself pretty clothes, und do all kinds of vonderful things. Isn't dot all we could vant, Gretchen?"

Simon glanced at the girl again. He knew that she had been studying his face ever since he had first spoken, but his clear gaze turned on her with its hint of the knowledge veiled down almost to invisibility. Even so, it took her by surprise.

"Why—yes," she stammered; and then in an instant her confusion was gone. She slipped her hand under the old man's arm and rested her cheek on his shoulder. "But I suppose it's all very ordinary to you."

The Saint shook his head.

"No," he said gently. "I've known what it is to feel just like that."

And in that moment, in one of those throat-catching flashes of vision where a man looks back and sees for the first time what he has left behind, Simon Templar knew how far he and the rest of the world had travelled when such a contented and unassuming honesty could have such a strange pathos.

"I know," said the Saint. "That's when the earth's at your feet, and you look at it out of an enchanted castle. How does the line go?—*'Magic casements opening on the foam of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn . . . .'*"

"There's music in that," she said softly.

But he wondered how much she understood. One never knows how magical the casements were until after the magic has been lost.

She had her composure back—even Rhine Maidens must have been born with that defensive armour of the eternal woman. She returned his gaze calmly enough, liking the reckless cut of his lean face and the quick smile that could be cynical and sad and mocking at the same time. There was a boyishness there that spoke to her own youth; but with it there were the deep-etched lines of many dangerous years which she was too young to read.

"I expect you know lots of marvellous places," she said.

The Saint smiled.

"Wherever you went now would be marvellous. It's only tired and disillusioned people who have to look for sensations."

"I'm spoiled," she said. "Ever since we left home I've been living in a dream. First there was New York, and then the boat, and then Paris, and Cologne—and we've scarcely started yet. I haven't done anything to deserve it. Daddy did it all by himself."

The old man shook his head.

"No Gretchen. I didn't do it all by myself. There was dot great man who helped me. You know?" He looked at the Saint. "Und he is on this train him-

self!"

"Who's that?" asked the Saint cheerfully.

"Mr. Voyson. Mr. Bruce Voyson. He has der big factory where I vork. When I safe a little money I put it in his company because they pay so big dividends, und so there is always much more money; und I invest dot also, and so it all helps us. All my money I have in his company."

Simon hardly moved.

"Sometimes I see him in der factory, und he has always something to say to me," said the old man almost reverently. "Now today I see him on der platform at Cologne. You remember, Greta? I think he is very tired with all the vork he does to look after the factory, because he is vearing dark glasses und he is very stooped like he never was before und his hair is gone quite white. But I recognize him because I have seen him so often, und besides he has a scar on his hand dot I remember so vell and I see it when he takes off his glove. So I go up und speak to him und thank him, und at first he does not recognize me. Of course he has so many employees in der big factory, how can he remember every one of them all der time? But I tell him, 'You are Mr. Voyson und I vork in your factory fifteen years und I invest all my money in your company, und I vant to thank you that now I can retire and go home.' So he shakes hands with me, und then he is so busy that he has to go away. But he is on der train, too."

"You put all your money in Voyson's company?" repeated the Saint, with a sudden weariness.

The old man nodded.

"Dot is how I mean, I didn't do it all by myself. If I hadn't done that I should've had to vork some more years."

Simon Templar's eyes fell to the newspaper on his knee. For it was on that day that the collapse of the Voyson Plastics Company was exposed by the sudden disappearance of the President, and ruined investors learned for the first time that the rock on which they had been lured to found their fortunes was nothing but a quicksand. Even the local sheet which the Saint had bought devoted an entire column to the first revelations of the crack-up.

Simon drew a slow breath as if he had received a physical blow. There was nothing very novel about the story; there never will be anything very novel about these things, except for the scale of the disaster; and certainly there was nothing very novel about it in the Saint's experience. But his heart went oddly heavy. For a second he thought that he would rather anyone but himself should bring the tragedy—anyone who hadn't seen what he had seen, who hadn't been taken into the warmth and radi-

ance of the enchanted castle that had been opened to him. But he knew that the old man would have to know, sooner or later. And the girl would have to know.

"Maybe you haven't read any news lately," he said quietly, and turned away to the window because he preferred not to see.

The lottery of travel had done a good job. It reached out into the world and threw lives and stories together, shuffled them in a brief instant, and then left them altered forever. An adventurer, a Rhine Maiden, an old man. Hope, romance, a crooked company promoter, a scrap of cheap newsprint, tragedy. Perhaps every route that carries human freight is the same, only one doesn't often see the working of it. Human beings conquering and falling and rising again, each in his own trivial little play, in the inscrutable loneliness which everything human makes for itself wherever crowds mingle and never know each other's names. Simon Templar had loved the lottery for its own sake, because it was a gamble where such infinitely exciting things could happen; but now he thought that it looked on its handiwork and sneered. He could have punched it on the nose.

After a long time the old man was speaking to him.

"It isn't true. It couldn't be true. Der great big company like dot couldn't break down!"

Simon looked into the dazed honest eyes.

"I'm afraid it must be true," he said steadily.

"But I spoke to him only a little vhile ago. I thanked him Und he shook hand with me." The old man's voice was pleading, pleading tremulously for the light that wasn't there. "No man could have acted a lie like dot . . . . Vait! I go to him myself, and he'll tell me it isn't true."

He stood up and dragged himself shakily to the door, holding the luggage rack to support himself.

Simon filled his lungs.

He fell back into the reality of it with a jolt like a plunge into cold water, which left him braced and tingling. Mentally, he shook himself like a dog. He realized that the fragment of drama which had been flung before him temporarily obscured everything else; that because the tragedy had struck two people who had given him a glimpse of a rare loveliness that he had forgotten for many years, he had taken their catastrophe for his own. But they were only two of many thousands. One never feels the emotion of these things, except academically, until it touches the links of one's own existence. Life was life. It had happened before, and it would happen again. Of the many crooked financiers whom the Saint had known to their loss, there was

scarcely one whose victims he had ever considered. But Bruce Voyson was actually on the train, and he must have been carrying some wealth with him, and the old man knew what he looked like.

The girl was rising to follow, but Simon put his hands on her shoulders and held her back.

"I'll look after him," he said. "Perhaps you'd better stay here."

He swung himself through the door and went wafting down the corridor, long-limbed and alert. A man like Bruce Voyson would be fair game for any adventurer; and it was in things like that that the Saint was most at home. The fact that he could be steered straight to his target by a man who could really recognize the financier when he saw him, in spite of his disguise, was a miracle too good to miss. Action, swift and spontaneous and masterly, was more in the Saint's line than a contemplation of the brutal ironies of Fate; and the prospect of it took his mind resiliently away from gloom.

He followed the old man along the train at a leisured distance. At each pause where the old man stopped to peer into a compartment the Saint stopped also and lounged against the side, patient as a stalking tiger. Some time later he pushed into another carriage and found himself in the dining-car, for it was an early train with provision for the breakfasts of late-rising travellers. The old man was standing over a table halfway down; and one glance was enough to show that he had found his quarry.

Simon sank unnoticed into the adjoining booth. In a panel of mirror on the opposite side he could see the man who must have been Bruce Voyson—a thin dowdily dressed man with the almost white hair and tinted glasses which the old German had described. The glasses seemed to hide most of the sallow face, so that the line of the thin straight mouth was the only expressive feature to be seen.

The old German was speaking.

"Mr. Voyson, I'm asking you a question und I vant an answer. Is it true dot your company is smashed?"

Voyson hesitated for a moment, as if he was not quite sure whether he had heard the question correctly. And then, as he seemed to make up his mind, his gloved fingers twisted together on the table in front of him.

"Absolute nonsense," he said shortly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The old man swallowed.

"Then vhy is it, Mr. Voyson, dot der paper here says dot it is all smashed, und everyone vants to know where you are?"

"What paper is that?" demanded Voyson; but there was

a harsh twitch in his voice.

The old man dropped it on the table.

"Dot's der paper. If you don't understand Cherman I translate it for you. It says: 'Von of der biggest swindles in history was yesterday in Maxton, Ohio, exposed——' "

Voyson bit the corner of his mouth, then swung round.

"Well, what obout it?"

"But, Mr. Voyson, you cannot speak of it like dot. You cannot realize vat it means. If it is true dot der money is all gone . . . You don't understand. All my life I vork and vork, und I safe money, und I put it all in your company. It cannot be true dot all my money is gone—dot all my life I have vork for nothing——"

"Suppose it is gone?" snapped Voyson. "There are plenty of others in the same boat." He sighed. "It's all in the luck of the game."

The old man swayed and steadied himself heavily.

"Luck?" he said hoarsely. "You talk to me of luck? When I am ruined, und it says here dot it vas a swindle—dot you are nodding but a criminal—"

Voyson's fist hit the table.

"Now you listen to me," he rasped. "We're not in America now—either of us. If you've got any complaints you can take me back to Ohio first and then go ahead and prove I swindled you. That'll be soon enough for you to start shooting off your mouth about criminals. Now, what d'you think you're going to do about it? Think it over. And get the hell out of here while you do your thinking, or I'll call the guard and have you thrown off the train!"

The Saint's muscles hardened, and relaxed slowly. His dark head settled back almost peacefully on the upholstery behind him; but the wraith of a smile on his lips had the grim glitter of polished steel. A steward hovered over him, and he ordered a sandwich which he did not want without turning his head.

Minutes later, or it might have been hours, he saw his travelling acquaintance g o i n g past him. The old man looked neither to right nor left. His faded eyes stared sightlessly ahead, glazed with a terrible stony emptiness. His big toil-worn hands, which could have picked Voyson up and broken him across one knee, hung listlessly at his sides. His feet slouched leadenly, as if they were moved by a conscious effort of will.

Simon sat on. After another few minutes Voyson paid his bill and went past, walking jerkily. His coat was rucked up on one side, and Simon saw the tell-tale bulge on the right hip before it was straightened.

The Saint s p r e a d coins thoughtfully on the table to cover the price of his sandwich. His eyes ran over the selection of condiments which had come

with it, and almost absent-mindedly he dropped the pepperpot into his pocket. Then he picked up the sandwich as he stood up, took a bite from it, and sauntered out with it in his hand.

At the entrance of the next coach something caught at the tail of his eye, and he stopped abruptly. The door at the side was open, and the bowed figure of the old German stood framed in the oblong, looking out. The broad, rounded shoulders had a deathly rigidity. While Simon looked, the g n a r l e d hands tightened on the hand-rails by which the figure held itself upright, stretching the skin white over the knuckles; then they let go.

Simon covered the distance in two lightning strides and dragged him back. A train passing in the opposite direction blasted his ears with its sudden crashing clamour, and went clattering by in a gale of acrid wind. The old man fought him blindly, but S i m o n ' s lean strength pinned him against the bulkhead. The noise outside whisked by and vanished again as suddenly as it had come, giving place to the subdued rhythmic mutter of their own passage.

"Don't be a fool!" snapped the Saint metallically. "What sort of help is that going to be to Greta?"

The old man's struggling arms went limp gradually. He gazed dumbly back, trying to understand. His throat moved twice, convulsively, before his voice came.

"Dot's right . . . dot's right . . . I must look after Greta. Und she is so young . . . "

Simon let him go, and he went weakly past, around the corner into the main corridor.

The Saint lighted a cigarette and inhaled deeply. It had been close enough . . . And once again he gave himself that mental shake, feathering himself down to that ice-cold clarity of purpose in which any adventurer's best work must be done. It was a tough break for the old Dutchman, but Simon couldn't keep his mind solely on that. He didn't want to. Such distractions as the rescuing of potential damn-fool suicides from sticky ends disturbed the even course of buccaneering. Voyson was on the train; and the ungodly prospered only that a modern pirate might loot them.

A little way further down the carriage Simon found the financier sitting in a first-class compartment by himself. The Saint eased back the door and stepped through, s l i d i n g it shut behind him. He stood with his sandwich in one hand and his cigarette in the other, balancing himself against the sway.

"A word with you," he said.

Voyson looked up.

"Who are you?" he demanded irritably.

"*New York Herald Tribune,* European editor," said the Saint coolly and mendaciously. "I want an interview. Mind if I sit down?"

He took a seat next to the financier as if he had never considered the possibility of a refusal.

"Why do you think I should have anything to tell you?"

The Saint smiled.

"You're Bruce Voyson, aren't you?" He touched the man's head, then looked at his fingertips. "Yes, I thought so. It's wonderful what a difference a little powder will make. And those dark glasses help a lot, too." His fingers patted one of Voyson's hands. "Besides, if there's going to be any argument, there ought to be a scar here which would settle it. Take that glove off and show me that you haven't got a scar, and I'll apologize and go home."

"I've no statement to make," said Voyson coldly, though the ragged edge of his nerves showed in the shift of his eyes and the flabby movement of his hands. "When I have, you'll get it. Now, d'you mind getting out?"

"A bad line," murmured the Saint reprovingly. "Very bad. Always give the papers a break, and then they'll see you get a good seat when the fireworks go off." He put his left arm around the financier's shoulders, and patted the man's chest in a brotherly manner with his right hand. "Come along, now, Mr. Voyson—let's have the dope. What's the inside story about your company?"

Voyson shook him off savagely.

"I've got no statement to make, I tell you! The whole story's a rigmarole of lies. When I get back I'll sue every paper that's printed it—and that goes for yours, too! Now get out—d'you hear?"

"Spoken like a man," drawled the Saint appreciatively: "We ought to have had a newsreel here to record it. Now, about this trip of yours——"

"Where did you get that?" whispered Voyson.

His eyes were frozen on the booklet of coloured papers which the Saint was skimming through. Simon glanced up and back to them again.

"Out of your pocket," he answered calmly. "Just put me down as inquisitive."

He turned the leaflets interestedly, examining them one by one until he came to the end. Then he replaced them in their neat folder, snapped the elastic, and stowed it away in his own pocket.

"Destination Batavia, I see," he remarked genially. "Well, I'm sure you'll be able to straighten everything out when you get back to Maxton. Putting duty before everything else and going home by the shortest route, too. Indonesia is on the direct line to Ohio

from here—via Australia. Are you taking in Australia? You oughtn't to miss the wallabies . . . You certainly are going to have a nice long voyage to recover from the strain of trying to save your shareholders' money. And, by the way, there are quite a lot of extradition difficulties from Indonesia to the United States when a guy is wanted for your particular kind of nastiness, aren't there?"

Voyson rubbed his chin with a shaking hand. His gaze was fixed on the Saint with the quivering intensity of a guinea-pig hypnotized by a snake.

"Picked my pocket, eh?" he got out harshly. "I'll see your editor hears about that. I'll have you arrested!"

He reached for the communication cord. Simon tilted his head back and half-closed his eyes.

"What a story!" he breathed ecstatically. "Of course it'll delay you a bit having to stay on in Germany to make the charge and see it all through. But if you think it's worth it, I do. It'd be front-page stuff!"

Voyson sank down again.

"Will you get out of my compartment?" he grated. "I've stood as much from you as I intend to——"

"But you haven't stood as much from me as I've got waiting for you, brother," said the Saint.

His eyes opened suddenly, very clear and blue and reckless, like sapphires with steel rapier-points behind them. He smiled.

"I'm here on business, Bruce," he said in the same gentle voice with the tang of bared sword-blades behind its melting smoothness. "I won't deceive you any longer — the Herald Tribune only knows me from the comic section. And I don't like you, brother. I never have cared much for your line of business, anyway, and the way you spoke to that poor old man in the dining-car annoyed me. Remember him? He was on the point of chucking himself off this train under another one just now when I happened along. Somehow, my pet, I don't think it would have distressed me nearly so much if you'd had the same idea."

"Who are you?" asked Voyson huskily.

"I am the Saint — you may have heard of me. Just a twentieth-century privateer. In my small way I try to put right a few of the things that are wrong with this cock-eyed world, and clean up some of the excrescences I come across. You come into the category, comrade. You must be carrying quite a tidy bit of boodle along to comfort you in your exile, and I think I could spend it much more amusingly than you——"

Voyson's lips whitened. His hand slipped behind him, and Simon looked down at the barrel of an automatic, levelled

into the centre of his chest. Only the Saint's eyebrows moved.

"You've been getting notions from some of these gangster pictures," he said. "May I go on with my eating?"

He put the sandwich on his knee and lifted off the top slice of bread. Then he felt in his pocket for the pepper-pot. The perforations in the top seemed inadequate, and he unscrewed the cap.

Voyson squinted at him.

"That makes it easier to deal with you," he said; and then a cloud of pepper struck him squarely in the face.

It came with a crisp upward fling that drove the powder straight up his nostrils and up under the shield of his glasses into his eyes. He choked and gasped, and in the same instant his gun was struck aside and detached skilfully from his fingers.

Minutes of streaming agony passed before his tortured vision returned. While he wept with the stinging pain of it his pockets were rifled again, this time without any attempt at stealth. Once he tried to rise, and was pushed back like a child. He huddled away and waited impotently for the blindness to wear off.

When he looked up the Saint was still there, sitting on the seat opposite him with a handkerchief over his face and a litter of papers sorted out on his lap and overflowing on either side. The window had been lowered so that the draught could clear the air.

"You crook!" Voyson moaned.

"Well, well, well!" murmured the Saint amiably. "So the little man's come to the surface again. Bad business, that hay fever of yours. Speaking as one crook to another, Bruce, you ought to give up gunplay until you're cured. Sneezing spoils the aim."

He removed the handkerchief from his face, sniffed the air cautiously and tucked the silk square back in his pocket. Then he began to gather up the papers he had been investigating.

"I can only find ninety thousand dollars in cash," he said. "That's not a lot of booty out of a five-million-dollar swindle. But I see there are notes of two million-dollar transfers to the Asiatic Bank in Batavia; so maybe you didn't do so badly out of it. I wish we could touch some of that bank account, though."

He enveloped the documents deliberately in the wallet from which he had taken them, and tossed it back. Voyson's bloodshot glare steadied itself.

"I'll see that you don't get away with this," he snarled.

"Tell me how," invited the Saint, but his smile was still a glitter of clean-cut marble.

"Wait till we get to Mainz. There are plenty of people on this train. What are you going

to do—walk me out of the station under that gun in broad daylight? I'd like to see you do it. I'll call your bluff!"

"Still hankering for that publicity?"

"I've got to have those tickets," said Voyson, with his chest labouring. "And my money. I've got to get to Batavia. You won't stop me! I shan't have to stay behind to make any charges. Your having a gun will be enough—and my money and tickets on you. I know the numbers of all those bills, and the tickets are signed with my name. The police'll be glad to see you!" Voyson's hands were clenching and twitching spasmodically. "I think I read about you being in trouble here some time ago, didn't I?"

Simon said nothing, and Voyson's voice picked up. It grew louder than it need have done, almost as if the financier was trying to bolster up his own confidence with the sound of it.

"The German police wanted you pretty badly then! You're the Saint, eh? It's a good thing you told me."

"You make things very difficult, brother," said the Saint.

His quietness was unruffled, almost reflective; yet to any man in his senses that very quietness should have flared with warnings. Voyson was beyond seeing them. He leaned forward with the red pinpoints in his stare glittering.

"I want it to," he raved. "You've come to the wrong man with your nonsense. I'll give you thirty seconds to hand back my tickets——"

"One moment," said the Saint.

His soft incisiveness floated like a white-hot filament across the other's babble of speech; and suddenly Voyson saw the coldness of his eyes and went silent.

"You're reminding me of things that I haven't remembered for a long time," said the Saint soberly.

His cigarette - end dropped beside his heel, and was trodden out. The blue eyes never looked down at it.

"You're right — the Saint has been something of a crook sometimes, even if that didn't hurt anybody but specimens like you. And since I reformed I've become rather sophisticated. Maybe it's a pity. One loses sight of some simple elementary things that were very good. It wasn't always like that. Since you know my name so well, you may remember that I once had only one cure for creatures like you. I was judge and executioner."

The train thundered south, perfected machinery roaring on its unswerving lines through a world of logic and materialism forged into wheels. And in one compartment of it Bruce Voyson sat mute, clutched in an eerie spell that drove like a clammy wind through the logic

on which he had based his life.

"Romantic, wasn't it?" went on that incredible voice. "But the law has so many loopholes. Before it can hang you for murder you've got to beat your victim's brains out with a club. And yet you are a murderer, aren't you? Just a few minutes ago a friend of ours would have committed suicide on your account if I hadn't spotted him in the nick of time. For all I know, others may have done the same thing already. Certainly some of your victims will. And while that's going on, you're on your way to Batavia to enjoy at least two million dollars of their money — two million which would do a little towards helping them to a fresh start. And all those dollars would be available for the receivers if you met with an unfortunate accident. There doesn't seem to be any obvious reason why you should go on living, does there?"

Simon Templar put his hand in his pocket and took out the folder of tickets. Deliberately he tore it across twice and scattered the pieces out of the window. Voyson started forward with a strangled gasp and looked into the muzzle of his own gun.

"You've reminded me of days that I like to remember," said the Saint. "There is a justice above the law; and it seems just that a man like you should die."

Voyson's red - rimmed eyes narrowed, and then he flung himself across the short space.

Simon took out a handkerchief and wiped the gun carefully all over. It was a small-calibre weapon, and the single crack of it should not have alarmed anyone who heard it among the other noises of the train.

Still holding it in his handkerchief, he folded Voyson's fingers around the butt, taking care to impress their prints on the shiny surface. Voyson slumped in the corner, with the bullet puncture in his right temple showing in the centre of a shaded circle of burnt cordite. Working with dispassionate speed, the Saint dropped his sandwich and pepper-pot out of the window, picked up a couple of crumbs, and erased his fingerprints from the handle. He wiped the inside catch of the door in the same way, slid it back, and brushed his handkerchief over the outside as he closed it again. There was no flaw in the scene; nothing could have seemed more natural than that a man in Voyson's position should have lost his nerve and taken the easy way out. Simon was without pity or regret.

But as he went back to his own compartment he felt happy. He had always known that the old days were good; and the return had its own emotion.

He saw his fellow-travellers

again with a sense of surprise and unreality. For a while he had almost forgotten them. But the old German c a u g h t his hand as he sat down, holding it in a kind of tremulous eagerness, with a pathetic brilliance awake in his dulled eyes.

"I vant to thank you," he said. "You safe me from doing something very foolish. I vas a coward — a traitor. I run away."

"Don't we all?" said the Saint.

The old man shook his head.

"Dot v o u l d h a v e been a wicked thing to do. But I am not like dot now. Perhaps it isn't so bad. I am used to vork, und at my age I have so much experience, I am a better vorkman than any young man. So I say I go back und vork again. Does a few more years matter so much?"

"And I'm going to work too," said the girl. "Between us, we'll get it all back twice as quickly."

Simon looked at them both for a long time.

There were ninety thousand dollars in his pocket, which was money in any man's life He could have enjoyed every cent of it. He didn't want to see what he was seeing.

And yet, half against his will, against the r e s e n t f u l primitive selfishness which is rooted in every man, adventurer or not, he found himself looking at something grand and indestructible. Even the enigma of the Rhine Maiden baffled him no longer. He saw it only as the riddle of the ultimate woman waiting for life in the fearless faith of the enchanted castle, waiting for the knight in shining armour who must come riding down the hills of the morning with her name on his shield. And he did not want to see the magic dimmed.

"I don't think you'll have to do that," he said.

He smiled, and held out the thin folds of bills he had taken. Life was still rich; he could take plenty more. And some things were cheap at any price.

"I had a word with Voyson myself. I think I made him see that he couldn't get away with what he was doing. Anyway, he changed his mind. He asked me to give you this."

The train was slowing up; and a guard came down the corridor s h o u t i n g *"H i e r M a i n z, a l l e s umsteigen!"* Simon stood up and took down his valise. Being human, he was aware that the girl's eyes were fixed on him with an odd breathlessness; and he thought that she could carry with her many worse ideals.

the poker player's wife

by . . . Cornell Woolrich

"Fellows," Joe Talbot said, "this is the wife." His voice was amiable, ingratiating, like it always was at the start of every game. "Betts, this is Mr. Wallace. And this is Mr. Neamy. And this here is—what'd you say it was again?"

"Roebeck," answered the man whose name had been forgotten.

Mr. Wallace had pricked up his ears. "That's a good name for a poker-player's wife." He looked her over with a not too impersonal eye.

"Short for Bettina," she explained with a laugh.

She wondered idly whether they'd all given their right names. It didn't matter too much in a poker game among strangers what name you went under, she supposed; what mattered was what kind of luck you had.

They found they were short one chair. The only remaining one in the room was a ponderous overstuffed armchair off in a corner, difficult because of its bulk to bring in close enough to the table for its occupant to have comfortable access to the

Cornell Woolrich, one of the genuinely great writers in this field (how many times haven't I heard other writers talk of "that Woolrich magic") should need no introduction to any reader of this magazine. As Anthony Boucher once wrote, "the terror of the impossible is Woolrich's special field." And here, the author of THE PHANTOM LADY, THE BRIDE WORE BLACK, etc., etc., introduces us to a woman whom you will remember for a very long time.

circular flow of the game. And in any case that would have left Joe's wife with nothing to sit on except the edge of the radiator. Which was deeply ridged, and would have been insupportable for any length of time.

Mr. Wallace came to the rescue. "I'll bring one in from my room," he said. "It won't take a minute. I'm on this same floor you are, just around the turn of the hall."

"Well, I'll be blowed," Joe said, genuinely surprised by the coincidence, she could see. They had spent the better part of an hour stalking one another downstairs in the lounge, in order to get up the game.

"Six-twelve," Wallace said, and he went to get the chair.

"Let's get down to business," Roebeck remarked surlily, when Wallace had come back again.

Joe took out a new deck of cards and broke the seal. He was never, she reflected, without a new deck of cards. He might be without a penny in his pockets, without a roof over his head; without a shave, without a haircut, without a toothbrush, without a watch (and she had known him to be without each of those things at one time or another), but he was never, he was *never,* without a fresh, unopened — and therefore unmarked—deck of cards somewhere near at hand.

"Five-card stud all right?" Joe said. He took the joker out of the deck, chucked it aside.

Joe shuffled. How often she'd seen him do this! It was a lovely thing to watch. The cards seemed to have a life of their own, dancing back and forth like flickers of light, too fast for the eye to catch, and barely touching his hands. The gold signet that was never off his finger glinted like a little blob of sunlight.

He splashed the cards out along the table in a semi-serpentine, like a stunted S. They each picked a card for dealer.

Joe got the high card, Joe got the deal.

After that, the game commenced without further ado.

Joe took the first pot.

She had to find something to occupy herself with. Reading was no good; she'd done so much of it she couldn't stand the sight of any more magazines. Besides, she wasn't much of a reader.

She went over to the bureau-drawer and took out a piece of unfinished knitting. With this coiled in her lap, she ensconced herself in the only chair they'd left to her, a large overstuffed one in the far corner of the room. The combination of the jaunty, up-to-date evening-frock and the prim, old-fashioned knitting made a bizarre contrast. Her knitting was not too good, but at least it gave her something to pass the time with during these (sometimes) night-long games.

Joe took the second pot, too.

Roebeck got up and changed his seat around to the other side of the table, but his luck went right after him. His face was sour as a persimmon.

Neamy had taken off his coat. He had black elastic armbands around his sleeves. Damp patches showed on his shirt where it covered his armpits. She wondered if he ever bathed, without caring whether or not he did.

The game went on.

"Raise," somebody said.

And on and on.

"Raise," somebody said again.

And on and on and on.

"This is my last hand," Neamy announced dismally, folding.

"You can't win your money back if you get up and walk away from it," Wallace pointed out.

Neamy sliced his hand around in refutation. "If your luck hasn't changed this far into a game, it ain't going to change any more the rest of the night long. I've used up all my playing money, and I ain't going to dig into my not-for-playing-with money. I'm a working man, and even as it is right now I'm going to be working the next two weeks for nothing."

"Got carfare?" Joe murmured insultingly.

Neamy got up and stormed out, giving the door a smart crack behind him.

"If a man can't handle his cards, he shouldn't sit in on games," said Joe, reasonably enough.

"He handled them all right," opined Wallace. "He didn't have any to handle, that's what the trouble was."

Neamy was forgotten (as every card-player is who ever left a table a loser) and the game went on as though he'd never been there.

A chair scuffed and she looked up. This time it was Roebeck who was on his feet.

"You quitting too?" said Joe, riffling the cards.

"I should've quit before I started," Roebeck said.

Wallace was adding up something. "That makes two-seventy-four," he told Roebeck.

The latter reached into his pocket, brought out a mildewed billfold. He put something on the table. "Here's two hundred," he said.

"And——?" Wallace asked.

"I'll give you an I. O. U."

"I don't take I. O. U's," Wallace promptly answered.

There was a tense moment. She stopped knitting, but Joe went right ahead riffling.

"Look, if I lost to you, you'd expect me to pay up in full," Wallace said. "Well, I expect you to too."

"Come on, play," Joe barked angrily.

Roebeck reached into a different pocket this time, counted out some crumpled bills, brought them down on the table

with a vicious smack of his whole hand.

The door closed.

"Sore," was all Wallace said, laconically.

"Well," said Joe, "that separates the boys from the men. Let's go one more deal. Maybe I can do myself some good."

"'Kay," Wallace said briefly.

She put her knitting aside altogether and began to watch the deal. A lot depended on it. Joe was in the hole already and if this deal didn't pull him out of it, he was sunk.

The last deal began, the last deal of all. Sink or swim.

One up, one down. Joe an ace. Auspicious, she thought. Wallace a worthless five.

"Do you open?" Wallace asked.

"I open," Joe said. "One hundred dollars."

"I'm staying," Wallace said.

On the third card, Joe got a queen. Wallace got a miserable three.

Neither of them bet. They were both cautious now. She could feel the tension in the room mounting almost unbearably.

On the fourth card Joe got another ace. He was getting marvelous cards. He already had a pair exposed on the table.

A little pulse high up on his cheekbone started to tick with suppressed excitement. She'd never seen that before, as often as she'd watched him play.

He called her over to him. "C'mere, Betts," he said softly. And when she stood beside him, he deftly turned up one corner of his hole-card with a thumbnail. She could just barely make out the red letter "A." He had three of a kind, in aces!

She touched her lips for a moment to the top of his head, to bring him luck.

"Are we playing or making love?" Wallace demanded.

You'll find out in a minute, mister, she thought with an inward snort of exultation. She stepped back in the clear and watched.

He had reason to be sour. He'd gotten the lowest card in the deck, a two, just now. His cards seemed to be getting worse all the time.

"I — bet — you — one — thousand — dollars," Joe said, quietly and slowly, as if he were tasting every word on the tip of his tongue and finding it good to the palate.

"I'm staying," Wallace said imperturbably.

"Don't want to raise me, hungh?" Joe egged him on.

"Don't be impatient," Wallace said. "Don't be impatient."

From the little she knew of the game, she kept thinking frantically: Joe should call him now, Joe should call him now. Nothing can beat what Joe's holding. But she supposed he wanted to get all he could while he was at it, clean up good by raising him still further on the next card.

One more card to go.

Wallace hadn't gotten a picture-card through the whole deal. He got a four on the fifth card.

Joe got a six this time, but it didn't matter, he already had it made.

"It's going to cost you," he said thoughtfully, "five hundred dollars to stay in here."

Wallace poked the tip of his tongue against the lining of his cheek and made a little lump there for a minute.

"A card back," he said, "you were asking me if I wanted to raise you. I think I'll do it now, since there won't be any more cards coming out. Another five hundred."

Joe must have felt he'd played around with him long enough. There was now twenty-one-hundred dollars in the pot. He thought it was time to put him out of his misery. "Show me what you've got," he said gruffly. He turned over his own ace-in-the-hole.

"Beat this," Wallace said quietly, and turned up a lowly six. But it gave him 6, 5, 4, 3, 2. He'd built *d o w n w a r d* to a straight!

She heard the sound of a deep, shuddering breath being drawn, and it was herself.

Wallace stood there waiting, standing up in front of his chair. "Shall we settle?" he said.

Joe said, "Will you take a check?"

Wallace didn't answer for a moment. He even looked over at her for some inscrutable reason, as if calculating her as part of Joe's collateral. Then he said quietly, "If it's good."

"Joe —— !" she started to say, then bit it off short.

Joe could hardly write the check, his hand was shaking so.

Wallace waved it flauntingly in front of Joe's face, pretending to dry it. Then he folded it, once from each end, and put it inside his pocket. "Let's hope for the sake of all of us concerned," he said, swinging his glance around to include Betts, "there isn't any hitch when I present this for collection in the morning."

No good-nights were said.

He went over to the door, opened it, and looked back. Over the top of Joe's bowed head he had the unmitigated gall to wink at her. Then he closed the door.

"Joe——!" she began in a stricken whisper, the moment it closed.

He flicked his hand warningly toward her, so she'd wait until Wallace was out of earshot.

She went over to the door and listened; she could hear his footsteps going down the hall.

She turned to Joe again, distractedly pounding her knuckles into her palm. "Joe! Why did you give that to him? There is

no bank. There is no account. Where'd you get it from, anyway?"

"I stopped in one day, told them I'd run out of them. They thought I was one of their regular depositors, gave me a batch. I figured they might come in handy to flash around once in awhile."

"But flashing around isn't the same as filling one out. Joe, don't you know that spells jail? And he's just the kind that will make it stick. Joe, we've got to get it back again, I tell you!"

"I had to do it. There wasn't any way out of it." He knotted his fist and shook it fiercely—not at her but at his luck, somewhere up there over her shoulder. "He wouldn't take I. O. U's, you heard him say that. I would've had to welsh, and once word like that spreads around, you're through in this business. You're marked lousy, nobody'll play with you after that."

"He'll go to the bank first thing in the morning. Joe, we've got to get out of here fast! Before the bank opens. Six or seven o'clock, even earlier if we can make it."

"We can't," he said. "Don't you understand? We haven't a nickel. We're s t r a p p e d. We haven't even the price of this room. We'd have to skip out the back way. We haven't even enough to buy a pair of train tickets. We'd have to walk along the side of the road with our bags in our hands looking for a ride. We could be picked up as easy as a couple of pet rabbits by the ears."

"Joe, do you think he——?"

"No," he said glumly. "He played honest, he played on-the-square. I've been playing cards since I was a kid in knee-pants, and I can scent a sharpie or a cheat a mile away. I can spot them the minute they sit down at the same table with me. Anyway, what's the good of all that now? It's too late now."

He began to swear. All the savage, sizzling words and pairings of words she'd ever heard before, and lots she'd never heard before.

"Take it easy, Joe, take it easy," she said huskily.

She understood. It was just that when you loved something as much as that, that was how badly you felt about it. She knew, because she loved something as much as that herself. She loved him.

She began to pace the floor with long, slow strides, almost like a skater gliding cautiously over ice he isn't sure of. She held her arms tightly hugged across her, as though guarding some thought or idea she was carrying inside her.

"We've got to get it back," she kept repeating. "Got to get it back."

"All right, but how?" he demanded. "I suppose you think all I gotta do is knock on his

door, ask him for it back, and he's going to let me have it, as simple as that."

"No," she agreed, "I know he wouldn't give it back to you that easy." She emphasized the pronoun, the "you," a little, but he was too engrossed in the over-all problem to notice that.

"Joe," she said suddenly, "take a drink."

"Not now," he said with a squint of aversion. "I'm not in the mood. This thing has me too bugged."

"That's just it. It'll settle you down, help you get yourself together."

He reached for the bottle, then he didn't go ahead.

"He paid for it, remember?" she prompted him.

That seemed to have an effect. He picked it up and poured one out for himself.

They didn't say anything more for awhile. She kept pacing, he kept slowly drinking.

When his glass was down, she said: "Joe, pour yourself another."

"What for?" he asked bleakly.

"You can use it," she said.

He took a refill. He seemed to see his worries in his glass. Every time he lifted it he'd look into it wryly and wrinkle his forehead.

She still kept pacing. He half-turned his head around, at last, and growled: "Light somewhere, will you? You're making me nervous. What are you, training for a cross-country hike or something?"

She settled back passively against the wall, but in a posture that suggested leashed watchfulness or waiting, rather than passivity, her arms crossed behind her and resting against the wall.

The glass went up, and down, and up again.

"Take just one more, Joe," she said after awhile, almost like a mother coaxing a small boy to eat something that's good for him.

"I'm up to my limit now," he said. "You know I'm not a drinking guy. Cards is my soft spot, not booze. One more and I'll start going to sleep on you, like I always do."

"And snore," she added, a glimmer of affection flitting across her face. "Like you always do."

"You always say I do," he pointed out. "But how can I tell, if I'm asleep?"

All she said to that was, "I'd rather hear you snoring into my ear, than have just dead silence there, Joe."

She saw him put his glass down as though it were heavier than it really was. His eyes were starting to droop closed. Then with a suddenness as if he were a marionette attached to a cord that had all at once slackened above him, his head went over and onto the table and he was asleep. One arm stretched out beside him, the

other hanging into his lap.

In a moment the snores had started to come. Heavy, laborious, rough-edged as a buzz-saw, resonant as rain pelting into an empty rain-barrel.

Then with the clean sweep of a band-aid being stripped off a piece of skin, she tore herself away from the wall and went into a flurry of activity. Every move fast, every move deft, not a move wasted. No more standing against the wall leaning against her own hands.

She brought the phone over to the table, opened the line by taking it off its brackets, and placed it directly in front of his face, turned so that it received the full benefit of his exhalations.

Almost immediately, a raspy voice sounding like an angry horsefly trapped inside a bottle, began exhorting at measured intervals: "Your call, please . . . Your call, please . . ."

She went over to the door, opened it, and fixed the catch of the lock so that it could be opened again from the outside without a key.

Then she went out, turned to take one last look at him, and closed the door quietly after her. There was love in that last look.

Joe just slept on peacefully there.

She went rustling softly but purposefully down the long hall outside, an angel in a black dinner-dress whom any man would have been glad to welcome into his room.

* * *

Joe stirred blearily, and she was standing there shaking him. "Joe," she said, in a taut, feverish sort of way, "wake up. Wake up, will you, Joe."

The d e t a c h e d phone was emitting exasperated spitting sounds. She picked it up a second and listened. "Will you kindly hang up, sir! You've been snoring into my ear for the past eight or nine minutes, until I'm ready to scream!"

"Five-and-a-half." Betts corrected her mentally with a glance at her wrist, and just as Joe said "Huh? Washasay?" in a sleep-slushy voice close by the mouthpiece, she gently replaced it onto its arm.

"Joe," she said, holding up something to show him. "Here's your check back."

"Where'd you get it?" he asked, looking dazedly from it to her and back to it again.

"From the man you gave it to," she said tersely. "What do you want to do with it? Hurry up, Joe, there's not much time."

"Tear it up," he said.

"No, they can put little torn pieces together again. I know a safer way. Give me one of your matches, Joe."

She ran into the bathroom. There was a flickering butterfly of y e l l o w light for a moment, a hiss, a surge of water. When she came back again, he'd risen to his feet,

was standing looking at her. There wasn't sleepiness in his look any more, there was something else. Smouldering anger, the start of blind fury.

"So you went in there and got it." His eyes were the only things that moved. They were sizzling like shorted fuses.

"We had to have it back, Joe."

"So you went in there and got it," he said again. "Just like that."

"I got it, there's what matters."

"No," he flared. "You got it, ain't what matters. You went in there, is what matters."

"Joe, you don't think——"

"I don't think. What don't I think? You went to his door and said, 'Please, Mr. Wallace, I'd like to have that check back,' and he handed it to you on a silver platter. The easy way. Is that what I don't think? Well, you bet your life I don't!"

"I didn't get it the easy way, Joe. I got it the hard way. Please listen to me——"

His answer was the first swift, silent blow. It caught her on the side of the face, and she went staggering into the wall like a drunk. She didn't cry out. Perhaps it had been too sudden, perhaps too stunning.

He went after her and pulled her back toward him again, away from the wall, so that he would have enough clearance to swing in. Then he hit her from the other side, with his left.

The terrible thing in all cases of women being beaten by their men, is not the fact that they are women so much as it is the invariable lack of resistance. Even the weakest, the meekest, the most cowardly of men will offer at least a token resistance when another man strikes at him. A woman never, always providing the man belongs to her. It is as though something deep down inside her femininity were subconsciously saying to her—He's right. It's a part of being loved, so I must submit.

"The hard way! The hard way!" he kept panting. "Only it wasn't hard for you. It came naturally."

After that, he kept on hitting her indiscriminately, but none of the blows or swipes had the terrific impact, drive, of that first one.

"Joe," she whispered through cracked lips. "Don't, Joe. I love you."

With that, he spat full into her fact and then he stopped and let her alone.

She crumpled to her knees, and then sagged over sidewise onto one arm. Her hair came down over her eyes, and her cheeks looked as though she'd rouged them with a new kind of rouge: purple rouge.

She was crying, but you could only tell it by the way her breasts were quivering. The dress had split in a long diagonal gash, from one shoulder almost down to the opposite

hip. Her head fell forward as if in an attitude of mournful penance.

But the outrage to his ego hadn't yet been fully enough expiated to satisfy him. He swung a punch into his own hand now, not at her any more, a right hook, fist into palm, the way a baseball-player pounds his glove, and he locked his jawline into a grim grimace of detestation by shifting his upper jaw one way, his lower the other.

"Now I'm going in there and give him some of what you just got! But what you got won't be anything to what he's going to get! When I get through with him, he won't put a hand on another man's wife the rest of his life. He won't be in good enough shape to. I'll crack his head with my foot like I'd step on a cockroach."

She stirred a little, as though she wanted to say something, but she wasn't able to.

Without giving her another look he threw the door open and stormed down the hall. Not like she had, softly rustling, graceful on high heels, but like murder going some place on wheels.

He pummelled the door with enough force to wake the dead. (But they never do wake up.)

"Open up, Wallace!" he said. "You've got something coming to you, and I'm here to hand it out."

Then when he banged it again, the latch-tongue slid out of its groove, and the impact of his knock sent it gliding inward. It hadn't been closed fast.

The light was on, that was the first thing he noticed. But no one seemed to be in there.

"What're you doing, hiding?" he demanded truculently.

He noticed a bowl of ice-cubes drowning in their own juice, and a glass with a tan puddle at the bottom of it.

The room smelled of salivated cigar-smoke, stale whiskey-sour breath, and Betts' face-powder. That was the only sweet thing in it. He knew it from a hundred kisses in his own bed, and now it inflamed him all over again, like an aphrodisiac gone into reverse.

Then he saw a funny conformation of the bedclothes, like a road-map, like a graph, innumerable little lines all converging to point to where Mr. Wallace was. The bed had not been lain on, no one had been on it, either under the covers or on top of them. He could tell that; it still had its plumpness, its convexity. So she hadn't been unfaithful to him after all. But there were these little lines, like pleats, like fine creases, all leading toward a hidden point just over the edge of the bed, on the side away from him.

When he walked quickly around there and looked down, he saw what was doing it.

A hand, Mr. Wallace's hand,

was holding the bedclothes all gathered, bunched in, in its grasp. As though Mr. Wallace had tried to pull himself up from the floor by means of them, had risen maybe an inch or two, and then had fallen back again, but without releasing his hold.

Mr. Wallace wouldn't build any more straights. He was dead now, lying parallel to the bed, flat on the floor, and completely hidden from head to foot from the other side of the room, where you entered.

Just under his breast-bone a small cylindrical-shaped object was protruding, looking surprisingly like the cork of a bottle, though Talbot knew it couldn't possibly be that. As though he had been decanted of life, and then stoppered up again. Otherwise, there was no more trace on his shirtfront than would be left on the jaw or chin when a man nicks himself shaving. Just a couple of commas of carmine.

His eyes were open, seeing the hand that was being dealt him in the other world.

Talbot acted with that ungainliness, that lack of precision, that most people react with in such an emergency. First he moved away slowly backward. Then he turned and moved away s w i f t l y, forward. But twice he turned a r o u n d again, before he'd reached the door, to look back. Not just over-s h o u l d e r, he turned completely around, full circle, with unconscious grotesqueness.

Then he went out the door and started down the hall, fast. Then he remembered the door, and turned, and came back to close it. Then he started down the hall once more, even faster this time than the first.

He bolted back into his own room, and stood for a moment with his s h o u l d e r pressed against the door, as though to block anyone from coming in.

Betts was bending over a basinful of cold water, gently touching a saturated cloth to her bruised face.

"Why didn't you tell me you killed him?" he said in a husky whisper.

"Did you give me a chance?" she said dully. That was the full extent of her recrimination. No more than that.

"Leave off doing that," he said, taking her urgently by the arm. "We've got to get out of here fast, or we're a couple of dead ducks! We may just be able to make it, if we take it the back way. S o m e b o d y must've already been in there and spotted him, between the time you left and I went back in. I thought I saw Roebeck in the hall."

"No, Joe, no!" she insisted, putting her hand on his arm in turn, as a brake. "That's not the way to play it. If we take it on the lam, then we *are* in a jam. We never stop running,

until they finally catch up with us, they always do; whether in minutes from now, or months, or years. Do you want that to be your life from now on? Always running, always hiding, then breaking out and running some more. And r u n n i n g where? Into their w a i t i n g arms, ahead of us all the time that we've been r u n n i n g straight toward them."

"Stay here and *take* it? *Own* up——?" he said bewilderedly.

She nodded rapidly. "Listen to me carefully. I know you've got a good, quick mind, Joe, or you wouldn't be able to play cards the way you do. So hold on to each thing as I say it to you, there won't be time to say it a second time. This is the difference it makes: By running out, we're turning it into murder. And making it very hard to beat. By sitting pat and facing up to it, it stays just what it is: accidental killing in self-defense. I can beat that rap, Joe. A woman defending her honor. That may sound like corn, malarkey, but it still holds good, those things don't change. No man's court in this country will bring in a conviction against me. And those bruises I got from you will only make my case more effective. Isn't that the better way, Joe? They'll hold me for a few weeks until the trial comes up, and then it'll be over. We'll be free for the rest of our lives, not have to fear, not have to run, not have to hide."

"And you're willing to do this for me?" he breathed almost unbelievingly, looking at her as though he'd never seen her before.

"You're the man with the cards I married. And I have you to myself. My only rivals are the four ugly queens on pasteboard."

"You're out of this, Joe," she went on. "That bit I rigged with the phone sees to that. And it's better you should be. You wouldn't stand half the chance I do. A grudge between two men over a gambling-debt doesn't create any sympathy."

"Did you figure ahead of time it was going to happen, is that why you r i g g e d the phone?"

"That wasn't a precaution against a murder-charge. That was just a precaution in case he complained afterwards about missing the check; I didn't want him to try to have you pinched for it. I didn't dream it was going to happen like it did, or I never would have gone near there. I figured I could distract his attention in some way, and slip it out of his pocket without him noticing. But you can never count on drunks. He took the play away from me. I was no sooner inside the room, than he fastened such a bear-hug around me I couldn't move at all. I panicked, and feeling around with one arm, grabbed up this ice-pick that was lying behind me in a bowl of ice. I didn't drive it into him.

I scratched him across the back of the neck with it, so the pain would make him break the hold. It did, and I quickly brought it around in front of me, to ward him off. I still didn't drive it into him. He came at me again, and he was lushed to the eyeballs. He stumbled over something, or tripped over his own feet, and his whole weight came down on me like a ton of bricks. The thing pierced him as though he were made of lard."

She took a deep breath.

"That's all there is to the story, and it's all true, that's the beauty of it. It's no fake, no concoction; I can't be tripped, and I can't be tangled. Only one thing has to stay out of it. The check has to stay out of it. That clouds the issue. Outside of that, every word I'll be speaking will be the gospel truth. As I'm telling it to you, my husband, so I'll be telling it to them, the court."

There was a commanding knock on the door.

"There they are now," she whispered.

"Open up. Police," a voice said.

She squared her shoulders, and turned and looked at him, and smiled. There was no fear in that smile whatever. Side by side, with his arm around her and hers around him, they went toward the door together.

"Gee, Betts," he said contritely, "I didn't think you had it in you. You were always so meek, so mild, sitting there knitting, never answering back."

"Every wife has it in her, when the cards fall that way," she said quietly. "Every wife. Even a poker-player's wife."

NEXT MONTH

SIMON TEMPLAR HAD NO OBJECTION TO ANYONE HAVING FUN, BUT SOME THINGS WERE INCONGRUOUS ENOUGH TO MAKE HIM INQUISITIVE—THINGS LIKE

THE JOLLY UNDERTAKER

A NEW SAINT STORY by LESLIE CHARTERIS

—*in the November issue of* ***THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE***

the meaning of the act

by . . . Margery Allingham

"Trivial, vulgar, pettifogging puerile, footling. At times even dirty," said Lance Feering, taking up his glass. "I don't want to be hypercritical, old boy, but that's how I see this life of yours. It repels me. My stomach turns at it. I gag . . . You see what I mean?"

"The light is filtering through," agreed Mr. Albert Campion affably, as he flattened himself against the ornate tiles behind him. "Criminology does not appeal to you tonight."

They were in the famous bar of the Pantheon Hall of Varieties, more affectionately known as the Old Sobriety, in Rupert Street. It was almost the last of the great music-halls and, as usual, the small circular room with its wide window giving on to the auditorium was crowded. Lance was in form. He was demanding a considerable favour from his old friend and, since such was his temperament, the experience was making him truculent.

'Of course you batten on it,

There is a theory that the detective who is also a gentleman is out of fashion, but the continued popularity of Albert Campion seems to cast some doubt on this. Doubleday reissued three of Margery Allingham's novels, THE GYRTH CHALICE MYSTERY, THE FASHION IN SHROUDS, and TRAITORS PURSE, as THREE CASES FOR MR. CAMPION, this Winter.

From: Margery Allingham's MR. CAMPION AND OTHERS
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I know," he continued vigorously. "It's a mania with you. It's got into your blood like a bacillus. That's why I asked you to come along to-night to this ungodly hole." He paused. "I thought you'd like it," he edded, glancing anxiously under his thick brows at the tall thin figure beside him.

"Quite," murmured Mr. Campion, bending forward to look through the window across the dark stalls to the boxes beyond. "He's still sitting up there."

"So I should hope. There's still a turn to go before the lady comes on, isn't there?" Lance set down his glass hastily and took a look himself. "Good Lord, we don't want to see him. Shall we go back?"

"No, I don't think so." His companion surveyed the small bent figure in the second tier box. "He's all right. He seems to be enjoying himself."

"That's what I mean. That's why the whole thing is so repellent," Lance sounded querulous. "Why shouldn't he have a night or two on the tiles if he wants to? I shouldn't have dreamed of stalking the poor old badger if Marguerite hadn't been so insistent and so frightened. You haven't met Marguerite, have you?"

"His daughter?"

"Yes." Lance was unusually laconic. He sighed. "A beautiful woman frightened out of her wits can be very demoralizing. She's got bone, Campion, exquisite bone."

"I thought you designed stage sets?" remarked Mr. Campion unsympathetically. "S t i l l, w e won't go into that. Why is this poor bony female afraid?"

"Well, he's a distinguished bird, you know. He's a recluse, a famous man, an Egyptologist of world renown, he's lived like a bishop all his life, and now he's started sneaking out of the house like an adolescent and trotting off to music halls alone, all up and down the country, performance after performance. She t h i n k s he's either up to something or nuts. And I said 'bone,' not 'bony.' It's a question of design."

"Dr. Clement Tiffin," murmured Campion. "He's everything you say, and y e t w h y should that name make me think of crossword puzzles?"

"It shouldn't." Lance was irritated. "It should make you think of pyramids, incredibly decent and d e c a y i n g clubs, and the pavilion at Lord's. A n y w a y, don't go deducing *who* he is; we know that. I've got you along here to help me find out what he's up to. I mean, does the poor girl call in an alienist, or resign herself to the fact that the poor old boy at the age of seventy-seven has fallen for a beautiful Egyptian hip-waggler?"

Mr. Campion eyed him over the rim of his glasses.

"Is that your only problem?" he said. "Because believe me, if

you've had the impudence to get me out here simply for that..."

"Well, not quite," Lance admitted hastily. "Marguerite certainly isn't a fool, and she's got something pretty serious on her mind. I couldn't get much out of her, but she seems to think that the old man is in some sort of danger."

"Spiritual or bang-on-the-head?"

"Oh, p h y s i c a l. No dream stuff. I told you Marguerite's got brains."

"Brains and bone," said Campion. "Dear me, and a very fine seat on a horse, too, I shouldn't be surprised."

"I rather resent that, old boy." Lance was not s m i l i n g, and Campion, who knew him so well that his mercurial temperament was not the mystery it might well have been, suddenly perceived the situation. Lance was indulging in a phase of 'utter decency' and, since he invariably took colour from the people who happened to be interesting him at the moment, it followed as the night the day, t h a t t h e Tiffins were of a very definite class and type.

"Marguerite is not the sort of girl who'd come roaring round after Papa herself?" he suggested.

"Good h e a v e n s, no!" said Lance, scandalized.

"Ah," murmured Campion.

Lance was silent for a moment or so and finally decided to unbend.

"If you only knew old Tiffin, you'd see how remarkable it all is," he said. "He's so very much the -- er- - the top drawer, if you'll forgive the phrase. He's got a great brain, too. The idea of him sneaking out to see this blessed woman dance time after time in the most revolting little halls all over the place is incredible. He's not that sort of chap."

He looked round the pleasant dirty little bar as if he had never seen it before, and C a m p i o n watched him with his eyes dancing behind his spectacles.

" 'Ullo, Bert."

The salutation rang out across the room and, as soon as he heard the familiar cracked Cockney, C a m p i o n became aware of an impending social crisis.

"Cassy," he said.

"Wot O! Cor, this is a bit of all right. 'Ow are yer, chum?"

The crowd heaved and billowed, and a figure emerged from it. He landed squarely before them, his small rodent's face alight with bonhomie and gin. He was a little man, narrow-chested and narrow-faced, with slit eyes and a long, slender nose with a twitch to it. Sartorially he was quite remarkable, for he wore a vivid blue suit. His mind seemed to be running on clothes also, for he flicked Campion's shirt front with a grubby thumbnail.

"Washington's come home, I see," he said. "Come and 'ave one. 'Oo's yer pal?"

Campion performed the introduction with misgiving.

"Lance, this is Mr. Cassy Wild, a very old friend of mine," he said. "Cassy, this is Mr. Lancelot Feering, a celebrity."

If the final description was intended as a warning, Cassy was in no mood to take it.

"Sir Lancelot. 'Strewth, that's a moniker to go to bed with," he said cheerfully. "Named after an 'o r s e, mate? No offence meant and none took, I 'ope. What is 'e, Bert? A dick?"

Lance was eying him coldly. "I'm afraid I don't follow you," he said with the half apologetic smile which contains the deadliest insult.

"And that is lucky," cut in Campion, with haste and emphasis, as he trod delicately on one of Mr. Wild's long narrow shoes.

"Oh, I see." The newcomer cocked an intelligent eye at his friend and a long and meaning look was exchanged b e t w e e n them.

"How's business?" inquired Campion.

A row of abominable teeth appeared for an instant across the pallid waste of Mr. Wild's ignoble face.

"Not so bad," h e s a i d. "I caught a shice and did a carpet in the spring. Had to come to town without a coal. But a denar here and a denar there soon mounts up, you know, and I'm in clover. By the way, this is my m o n k e r y, so who's your party?"

"Myself, my friend, and our punter is an elderly and distinguished finger in Box B," replied Campion without hesitation.

"Okay, Bert." Mr. Wild shook hands effusively. "See you some other time. So long. It's a nice show. The palone in the Didikye turn is a knockout. Wot 'o."

Lance conducted C a m p i o n back to their seats in silence.

"That was rather an extraordinary thing to do, wasn't it?" he muttered as they sat down. "Surely there was no need to mention Dr. Tiffin to your repulsive friend, was there?"

"Didn't you take to Cassy?" Campion s e e m e d surprised. "He's a dear chap. As a matter of fact, that was most considerate of him. This is his district, as he told us, and he did not want to embarrass any friend of mine with his professional attentions. Very thoughful. Cassy has gentlemanly instincts, if t h e y a r e not sartorially expressed."

"Professional . . . ?" L a n c e twisted round in his seat. "D'you mean to say that fellow was a thief?"

"A whizz-boy," said Campion modestly, "i.e., pickpocket. The most skilful practitioner in the country. Don't raise your voice, old man. Listen to the pretty accordion player."

"Yes, but I say, Campion . . ." Lance was positively blushing. "You do know some most amaz-

ing people. Good Lord!"

"Marguerite w o u l d n ' t like him?" suggested Campion, and Lance did not deign to reply. He sat glowering, ill at ease and apprehensive, while every now and again he glanced up at the dark box above them where the bent figure of a little old man sat alone, watching the glittering stage w i t h idle introspective eyes.

Campion lit a match to look at his programme.

"Charmian, Exotic Dancer of the Desert," he read s o f t l y. "She's due any m i n u t e now. Cassy said she was a knockout, although he thought she was a gypsy. Still, he's no connoisseur. I wonder ... Why does that name Tiffin remind me of crosswords?"

"It doesn't. Don't keep saying that. You're g e t t i n g on my nerves." Lance stirred uneasily in his chair. "Thank heaven this chap's finishing. Here we are; number eight at last."

The dusty red curtain had descended with a sweep of tarnished tassel and fringe, and the accordion player was taking his call. The old man in the box drew back a little and raised his white head expectantly. The orchestra played a fanfare and the curtain rose agin, disclosing a semi-darkened stage.

G r a d u a l l y the light grew stronger, and Campion, w h o had expected the usual pseudo-Eastern eurythmics, sat up. The dancer was s t a n d i n g in the center of the stage, her arms at her sides. She was dressed in a long white tunic and an Egyptian headdress and collar. She was not particularly beautiful, and the profile, outlined against the dark hangings behind her, was strong rather than lovely. He glanced up at the box.

Dr. Tiffin had moved forward and the light from the stage caught his face. T h e r e was something unexpected in his expression, a sternness, almost a dislike, and Campion seeing it, suddenly remembered why his name had r e m i n d e d him so strongly of crossword puzzles. His eyebrows rose and his lips pursed to a soundless whistle as he turned back to the stage.

The girl who was billed as "Charmian" was no ordinary dancer. There was even something of the old-fashioned contortionist in her performance, yet she contrived to make her slow, unnatural movements pecularly graceful, and, what was far more extraordinary, peculiarly Egyptian, or, more specifically, ancient Egyptian.

Campion sat with his eyes fixed upon her, and again and again the rows of painted figures on the mummy c a s e s in the British M u s e u m leapt to his mind. The dance continued to slow music, and Charmian held her audience. The strange thing about her was her lack of facial movement. Throughout her turn she might have been wearing a mask, yet her powers of expres-

sion were amazing. She danced with an urgency of meaning which was unmistakable, and it seemed to be this dumb striving towards communication which reached out over the footlights and forced attention.

The clientele of the Old Sobriety was an exacting audience, and it could scarcely be called h i g h b r o w, yet it sat up and watched, fascinated.

Lance appeared to be spellbound. He did not stir throughout the turn, but remained rigid, his dark eyes round and surprised.

"Good Lord," he said, when at length the c u r t a i n descended upon her. "Good Lord, how incredible! She's like a blessed papyrus. Hallo, what's the matter with you?"

Campion said nothing, but there was a startled expression on his face, and his eyes were raised to Box B. Lance followed his glance and an exclamation escaped him.

"Gone," he said disgustedly. "Slipped round the back, I suppose, while we were gaping at his girl friend. Well, I don't altogether blame him for his enthusiasm. She's an experience to watch."

"Be quiet." Campion was on his feet. "Come on," he murmured, and there was so much anxiety in his voice that the painter rose and followed him without a word.

Lance did not catch up with him as he hurried through the auditorium, and only reached his side as he sprinted down the dusty corridor behind the circle.

"I say, you can't butt in on him," he protested in a flurry. "He's not that kind of old boy. We can't, Campion. Marguerite would never forgive me."

Campion flung off his restraining hand and opened the door of the box.

Dr. Tiffin lay on the floor beside the chair from which he had fallen. He had crumpled up and slipped forward, and there was a thin dark streak among his white hairs.

They got him out of the theatre and into a taxi. It was not altogether a simple matter, for the old man was still unconscious, but Lance was convinced that the absence of any scandal was of paramount importance, and Campion, for entirely different reasons, was disposed to agree.

"We'll get him home and then find his own doctor," he said. "He's all right. I think. His heart is sound, and there's no fracture. He'll be all right in a day or so."

"I don't understand it." Lance was white with apprehension. "When Marguerite said 'danger' I thought she was exaggerating. This is fantastic. He's only a fan of the dancer's, as far as I know. No one can mind him looking at her, surely, however attentive he is."

Campion glanced up from his patient, whom he was supporting in the back of the cab.

"That rather depends," he said slowly. "Look here, Lance, I fancy we're on dangerous ground. I think you may just have to wipe this incident clean out of your mind. Forget it. Pretend it didn't happen."

"What do you mean?"

Campion did not reply. Dr. Tiffin had begun to stir, and his voice, thick and slurred, startled them both. At first the muttered words were indistinguishable, but as they leaned forward anxiously a single phase came out clearly in the darkness.

"Thine uncle bears thee gifts," said the Egyptologist distinctly. He repeated it again, and the extraordinary words ceased to be ludicrous in that thin pedantic voice. *"Thine uncle bears thee gifts."*

"What?" Lance was shocked into the question. "What did you say, sir? What gifts?"

The old man did not answer. His head had fallen forward and he went off into incoherent mutterings once more.

"Did you hear that, Campion?" Lance's own voice rose to a squeak. "It's turned his brain. What an extraordinary thing to say, 'Thine uncle . . .' "

"Hush," said Campion gently. "Hush, old boy. Forget it. Here we are. Help me get him into the house."

Miss Marguerite Tiffin turned out to be a pleasant surprise to Campion. Lance's reactions had led him to expect, if not the worst, something very near it, but he found, instead of the academic snob he had envisaged, a very sensible and charming young woman with a snub nose and a quick, shy smile. Moreover, for a girl who was not used to having her Papa brought home on a shutter, she was remarkably cool and quick on the uptake. It was only when the old man was safely in bed with his doctor in attendance that she betrayed any sign of strain.

"I'm tremendously grateful to you, Lance," she said, "but you do see now that I was right to interfere?"

"Good Lord, yes." Lance was holding her hand far too long, and Campion was inclined to sympathize with him. "All the same I'm still in the dark. The whole thing bewilders me. It seems to be to be an entirely meaningless attack on an inoffensive old gentleman who wasn't doing anyone any harm."

Marguerite hesitated. She had round grey eyes, and at the moment they were intensely serious.

"Lance," she said slowly, "do you think you could go on thinking that, and then—then forget the whole thing utterly? Never mention it to daddy or to anyone else. I can rely on you to do that, can't I, Mr.

Campion?"

"Yes," said Campion gravely. "Yes, I think you can."

Lance came away unwillingly after lengthy farewells.

"I do wish you wouldn't be so darned mysterious," he grumbled, as they walked out of Bedford Square together. "I'll do anything Marguerite asks me within reason, of course, but why the hush-hush? What's the matter with the old man? Has he got some well-known form of bats-in-the-belfry which I've not heard about? What was all that about his uncle? Damn it, are you or am I?"

Campion hailed a cab, but Lance drew back.

"Now where are we going?" he asked.

"Back to my flat."

"What for?"

"Drink," said Campion. "If you must know, drinks, ginger biscuits, and I should rather think a visitor."

By midnight Lance was beside himself with irritation.

"An impossible evening," he declared. "What infuriates me is your blessed calm. Hang it, I invited you to help me follow old Tiffin, and what happens? First you introduce me to a little sneak-thief who seems to regard you as some sort of favourite relative, then we find Tiffin biffed over the head and we take him home, where Marguerite behaves as though she was taking in the laundry and you back her up in treating the entire thing as nothing to write home about. Finally, we sit up here waiting for a caller. Whom do you expect?"

Campion pushed the decanter towards him.

"I haven't the faintest idea," he said truthfully.

"You're potty." The childish accusation seemed to relieve the artist and he refilled his glass. "You haven't invited anyone and you don't know who is coming, but you've just got a psychic feeling that a visitor is imminent. Well, if I've got to sit up all night I may as well make something out of it. I'll lay you a hundred to one in shillings . . ."

He broke off abruptly. Out in the hall the electric bell had begun to ring authoritatively. An instant later Campion's man admitted without ceremony Superintendent Stanislaus Oates and a companion, and closed the door after them.

The two men stood on the threshold looking tall and official in the brightly lit room, and Campion rose to greet his old friend. The superintendent was cool. He was not hostile, but there was a formality in his manner which was not customary. After his first greeting he introduced the stranger with warning deference.

"This is Captain Smith, Mr. Campion," he said severely. He'd like a few words with you

and Mr. Feering about your activities tonight, if you don't mind. No, thank you, we won't drink."

The little company sat down stiffly. Captain Smith was a restraining influence. He was a lean, brown man with a dry precision of manner which enhanced the natural austerity of his personality. The one obvious fact about him was that his name was not Smith and that his rank was understated. Lance, who fancied himself as a student of faces, was startled by the impersonal penetration of his blue eyes. He glanced at Campion and was relieved to see that, although grave, he did not seem surprised.

"I rather expected a visit from the police," Campion remarked to Oates. "You've seen Dr. Tiffin, I suppose?"

"Yes." Captain Smith answered quietly, before the superintendent could speak. "Will you explain exactly why you went to the Pantheon Music-hall tonight, and why you were so peculiarly fortunate as to have been on the spot to render assistance as soon as it was needed?"

"Mr. Feering can explain that better than I can," Campion was beginning, when a second ring at the bell outside jolted everybody. No one spoke, and the two visitors turned slowly in their chairs to watch the door.

The manservant was some time in coming, and when at last he did appear he spoke dubiously.

"Mr. Cassy Wild to see you, sir," he said.

Lance stiffened. As an addition to this already somewhat sticky party the ebullient Cassy did not appeal to him. The same notion appeared to have occurred to Campion, he was relieved to see.

"Oh, ask him to wait," he said hastily. "Put him in the study."

"Very good, sir." As the man withdrew, Captain Smith swung around on Campion.

"A friend?"

"Yes. A very old one."

"That's all right, sir." The superintendent spoke deferentially. His grey face was impassive, but there was the hint of a twitch at the corners of his mouth. "I know him."

"I see. Then we'll go on. You were on the point of giving me an explanation, Mr. Feering."

Lance told his story frankly. He was a friend of Marguerite's, and she had confided to him that she was alarmed by her father's new habit of going off by himself after a lifetime of regular and studious habits. She had discovered that he had made a habit of watching every performance given by the dancer, Charmian, and that in order to do this he followed her all round the country, sometimes to the

most disreputable little halls. To satisfy Marguerite, Lance had gone to the Pantheon to see the dancer for himself and to watch the old man's reactions to her. Since he did not feel like going alone, he asked his friend Mr. Campion to accompany him.

Captain Smith listened to the recital with a perfectly impassive face, and when it was over he turned to Campion.

"Perhaps you would describe the incident as you saw it? Please don't omit anything."

Campion told the story of finding the old man half unconscious in the box, and Lance corroborated it.

"After the turn we looked up and could not see him in the box, so we went to investigate. We found he was hurt and did what we could," he repeated.

"You saw no one else in or near the box?"

"No."

"You're quite sure of that? No one at all?"

"No one," said Campion. "Nor," he continued firmly, "did I see him speak to anyone at all during the whole time that I was in the hall. He was entirely alone throughout the performance. Whoever attacked him must have opened the door of the box during Charmian's act, delivered the blow and left immediately. Nothing was touched. His pockets were not rifled. It was a personal attack. Someone meant to put him out and no one but him."

Captain Smith's heavy-lidded eyes flickered and he looked at Campion steadily.

"An attendant?" he suggested.

"No," said Campion decisively. "No, I don't think so. He was sitting up there in the box throughout the entire show, you see. Anyone could have noticed him. I don't see that it need have been an attendant. Anyone was at liberty to walk down the corridor. It might have been anyone in the entire audience."

"That's the devil of it," murmured Captain Smith, and for the first time a smile appeared upon his face. "Well, thank you very much for putting up with this intrusion. I shan't bother you either any more tonight, Superintendent."

"Very well, sir."

Oates took the dismissal respectfully and rose as the younger man took his leave.

After he had gone the atmosphere seemed a little easier, and Campion had just persuaded Oates to take a nightcap when the manservant reappeared.

"It's that Mr. Wild, sir," he was beginning, but broke off abruptly when he saw Oates. "I beg your pardon, sir. I heard the door and I thought both the gentlemen had gone."

"In a moment," said the superintendent, who was thawing visibly. "I'll be gone in a

moment. Let him cool his heels. I'm fond of you, Campion," he continued as the man went out, "and there's a lot I'd do for you, but some of your pals are beyond me. I just couldn't bring myself to take a drink with Cassy Wild."

Campion shook his head. "You don't appreciate him," he said regretfully. "You're too conservative. You expect everyone to have the same virtues. Cassy has *unusual* virtues. They are quite as numerous, if not more so, than most people's, but they're different."

"Very likely," Oates observed without enthusiasm, "but I'd want my pockets sewed up and my shirt padlocked to my collar before I went for a walk with him. 'Still, I didn't come up here to talk about Cassy. It was a pity you couldn't give the captain what he was after. You might have made yourself really useful for once. However, if you saw no one you saw no one; that's all there is to it."

Lance frowned. "I seem to be out of this altogether," he said bitterly. "The entire business is getting more and more bewildering. Who was that chap Smith, anyway?"

The superintendent coughed. "He's a very important officer, sir. I don't think we'll discuss him, if you don't mind. Just keep the whole matter under your hat, if you will. It was a chance in a thousand and it got missed. That's the long and the short of it. It can't be helped."

He paused and glanced at Campion with a sly smile. No one spoke and the superintendent's grin widened in spite of himself.

"I ought not to laugh," he said, "but I can't help it. It's not often Mr. Smarty gets himself into something that he doesn't understand. Right under his nose, it was, and he couldn't see it for looking."

Campion did not smile. He lay back in his chair, his eyes half closed behind his spectacles.

"Smith's a newcomer in the Special Branch, isn't he?" he said.

Oates choked, and his thin face grew a dusky red.

"Who said anything about the Special Branch?" he protested. "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't understand you at all. It's time I went home. It must be one in the morning."

Campion let him rise without demur, but spoke again before he had reached his greatcoat.

"When I first heard Dr. Tiffin's name tonight it reminded me of crossword puzzles," he remarked. "I could not think of the connection until I happened to see his expression as he sat looking at that dancer. Then it came back to me. He was in Room 40 OB during the war, wasn't he?"

"What if he was?" Oates was flurried. "Campion, for good-

ness sake stay out of this. It's not your cup of tea. It's not mine either. As it happened, you couldn't help. Let it rest like that. I can't discuss it with you. I daren't. It's not our show."

"Quite so, All the same I find it interesting, and if I'm right I think I might be useful." Lance had never heard Campion so gently obstinate. "Sit down and listen to me. I'll tell you how my mind is working. I may be shinning up a gum-tree, and if I am you can tell me so, politely and in official language. Now look here, this is how I see it. Dr. Tiffin happens to be a distinguished Egyptologist. His books on cuneiform and even earlier writings are famous. Also he was in Room 40 OB, the cipher decoding office, during the war. Those are two facts. Here are two more. Tonight I heard that he has suddenly started to visit every performance given by a certain dancer and during her turn this evening he was knocked out, presumably by someone who did not want him to see the whole of that dance. That gives me furiously to think.'

"Don't." Oates' advice was brief but heartfelt. "Forget it." Campion sat up.

"I think I would," he said earnestly, "but I saw that girl dance, and I think Lance here said the most enlightening thing about her show. When it was over he turned to me and said, 'She's like a papyrus.' She wasn't, of course, but I saw what he meant. She was like some of that picture-writing on the mummy cases. Now do you see what I'm getting at? Suppose that long, slow procession of poses of hers was like writing, Oates? Suppose she danced some sort of limited message? It would have to be limited, of course, because it would be in a sign language, and sign languages are limited."

Oates was staring at him. Presently he swore softly.

"You're too bright," he said. "You'll blind yourself one of these days."

Campion laughed. "I thought so," he murmured. "It's fantastic, but not so fantastic that it couldn't be true . . . 'Thine uncle bears thee gifts.' "

The final words, uttered casually, had an astonishing effect on the superintendent. The blood receded from his face and his jaw dropped.

"Where the devil did you get hold of that?" he demanded.

"Overheard it. Nothing clever about that," Campion admitted modestly. "Dr. Tiffin was muttering it when we carried him home. That was the message, I suppose, or part of it. He must have been rather quicker on the uptake than his assailant expected. Quite an easy message, I should think. Most of the tombs have something of the sort among their lists of funeral offerings. The burning ques-

tion, I take it, Oates, is . . . *whose* uncle?"

The superintendent did not reply. He seemed to be hovering on the verge of a confidence, and the soft knock on the door came as an unwelcome interruption. Campion sighed with exasperation.

"Oh, come in," he shouted.

The manservant entered with a dilapidated newspaper parcel on a silver tray.

"Mr. Wild has had to leave and wished me to give you this, sir," he said gravely. "I was to tell you he didn't mind waiting, but he took exception to the company you keep. I happened to let fall that the superintendent was here, sir."

"Blast his impudence!" said Oates, laughing. "What's he sent you? The fried fish supper you were going to share?"

Campion took the parcel and laid it on the arm of his chair unopened.

"Isn't that the question?" he persisted, as the door closed. "Whose uncle?"

Oates shrugged his shoulders. "You know too much," he said. "You'll get yourself in the Tower. It's all right to muscle in on my job, but you get your fingers into the espionage machine and you'll get 'em bitten off."

"E s p i o n a g e?" muttered Lance under his breath. "Spy hunting, by George!"

"Put it out of your mind, sir." Oates made the admonition firmly. "You can see exactly what's happened. That dancer has been under observation by our people for months. No one at all suspicious seemed to have access to her, and they could never get the link between her and an espionage system which must exist. Then it occurred to someone at Headquarters that she was transmitting instructions in this peculiar way through her dancing. Dr. Tiffin tried to decode the messages and I think he had been very successful, but the thing he couldn't tell, of course, was who else besides himself in each audience understood what she was saying, and that was the vital thing. That was what our people needed to know. Tonight there might have been a chance of finding out. No one thought the old gentleman might be attacked, although his interest in the lady must have looked highly suspicious to anybody in the know. If such a thing had been foreseen, he'd have been watched and we'd have found out something. Who ever attacked Dr. Tiffin is the key man, you see. He's probably living quietly over here under his own name like a respectable citizen."

"I still don't quite follow," said Lance f r a n k l y. "What would they do if they found him? Arrest him?"

"Arrest him?" Oates seemed scandalized. "Oh, no sir, foreign agents are never a r r e s t e d.

They're watched. They're even supplied with certain fancy information if they're mugs enough to take it. No, no, he'd have been followed. He would lead us to this 'uncle' who has the gifts, or the doings, whatever it is, and then *he* would be watched in his turn. Like that we'd uncover the entire network, you see. As I said, it was a chance in a thousand, but now it's gone. We'll never know who in all that audience was the other man who knew."

Campion nodded gloomily. "Yes," he said. "My hat, I wish I'd cottoned on to it a bit sooner." As he spoke he took up the newspaper packet and unwrapped it idly. An old brown leather wallet flopped on to his knees, and Oates laughed.

"Lumme," he said, "Cassy's brought you a bone! I'll have to pull you in one of these days, Campion. You'll get into trouble, mixing with scum like that. What *is* the explanation of that, may I ask? It looks darned fishy to me, I don't mind telling you."

"I haven't the faintest idea." Campion seemed surprised himself, and he bent down to retrieve a sheet of his own notepaper from the library desk which had fallen to the ground with the wrapping.

"Cassy's a dear chap, but he can't write," he observed as he glanced at the dreadful hieroglyphics spread out before him. "Strewth!"

The final word was forced from him and he sprang up, the wallet clasped in his hand.

"Oates," he said unsteadily, "read that."

Lance and the superintendent read the message together. Some of the slang was beyond the artist, but the general meaning was clear.

"Dear old sport," it ran. "Hoping this finds you as it leaves me, dry as a bone. I kept an eye on your punter in Box B partly because I wondered what you was up to I admit that. Well, I took sights of the finger who sloshed him. I did not interfere because I did not want to be mixt up in anything thank you, specially there, but I thought you'd like a memento of him so I took his number which I give you gratis. I have not took above ten bob from it, may I die if I lie, but the rest will give you the dope on him and where to find him. I wouldn't do this for anyone but an old pal, Bert, as you know, but you've always bin one to me. Give old Oates a wish on the kisser from me. Ta ta. You know who. C. Wild."

Oates read the note through twice without speaking. Words seemed to have failed him. Finally he took the wallet which Campion held out to him, and his hand shook a little as he opened it and spread out its contents upon the coffee table. Some minutes later he looked

up, and his expression was wondering.

"His name and address on two envelopes, a prescription from his doctor, and his driving license," he said. "Cassy's word might not jail a man, but it'll get this one watched. He's in the bag. Campion, you frighten me. Something looks after you."

Campion took up Mr. Wild's note and put it carefully in his pocket.

"Care for my secret, Superintendent?" he inquired.

"I'd like your luck," said Oates. "Well, what is it? I'll buy it."

"Take a drink with anyone," said Mr. Campion, "and pick your pals where you find 'em."

NEXT MONTH —

CASE OF THE MUTED VIOLIN
by RUFUS KING

MRS. BLOCK CONTRIBUTES
by E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

HOMICIDE, INC.
by RICHARD DEMING

STRANGE RANSOM
by WENZELL BROWN

THE GENTLE MURDERER
by PHILIP KETCHUM

RIDDLE OF THE BLUEBLOOD MURDERS
by STUART PALMER

and

THE JOLLY UNDERTAKER
A NEW SAINT STORY by LESLIE CHARTERIS

—in the November issue of THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

the galloping bandits

by . . George Fielding Eliot

Beni Mhlanga stood in the prisoner's dock, head high and face expressionless as became a Zulu warrior facing inevitable calamity. Behind this stoic mask there burned a raging resentment against the spirit world in general and a certain local witch doctor in particular. Ben—as he was generally known—felt that he had been shabbily served indeed. The **muti** which the witch doctor had concocted had set at liberty Ben's four pals—Muzzy, Sam, Nick and Vel, not to bore you with the Zulu names of which these were handy contractions. They had been dismissed for lack of evidence by the very same magistrate who now sat there on the bench thumbing through a large book, preparing to pass the sentence of the white man's law on luckless Ben. In this there was no justice. The tongue **muti** had been Ben's suggestion. Ben had provided the scrawny cow with which the witch doctor had been hired by Jake, the sixth member of the gang (unsuspected on this occasion and hence at liberty), to prepare the **muti.** The very assegai which Jake had

Major George Fielding Eliot, distinguished military analyst and frequent contributor to this magazine, returns with a true story from yesterday's South Africa, based on official police records. It must be stressed, though, that this IS yesterday's South Africa, and the story of an apolitical element in that country which had no known motivation for its acts other than the urge to strike out — and survive . . . *H.S.S.*

used to spear a stray herdsman in order to obtain a human tougue, the essential ingredient of this potent **muti**, had been Ben's. Of all men, Ben surely deserved to profit by these thoughtful arrangements.

Yet what had happened? Naturally, every one of the native witnesses on whom the Crown had depended to convict the five defendants of horse stealing had been stricken dumb when Jake had shown them the tongue **muti.** Their respective recollections of recent events had failed them on the witness stand with a consistency which had raised Ben's admiration of the witch doctor to a high level. Unhappily for Ben, in his case the Crown was able to present a witness who was unimpressed by **muti.** Sergeant Ker of the Natal Police—who are called by Zulus the Nongqai, "those who roam"—had given evidence that he had found two of the stolen horses in Ben's possession. Ben had explained this unhappy circumstance volubly and ingeniously, but his explanation had not carried conviction — except to Ben. Thus it would appear that the **muti** was worthless against the testimony of a white man. Or perhaps the Nongqai had a stronger **muti.** In either case, Ben's predicament was clearly the fault of the witch doctor.

He eyed the book which the magistrate was consulting. Perhaps that was the white men's **muti?** The magistrate closed the book and peered down at Ben through his spectacles.

"Beni Mhlanga," he said, "you have been convicted of the crime of horse stealing. Since this is your third conviction for the same offense, I sentence you to two years' imprisonment at hard labor, and to receive fifteen lashes on your bare back."

Two years! The lashes he could endure like a man—but to be shut up behind stone walls for two years—

"May it please Your Worship, I should like to be heard."

Young Lawyer Smith, who had defended all five of the accused, was on his feet. The magistrate nodded.

"I wish," said Lawyer Smith, "to give notice of appeal in behalf of this accused. It appears to me that he has been convicted on insufficient evidence, since his companions have been acquitted, since clearly the alleged crime could not have been committed by this man alone, and since the witness Jake has sworn that all five of the defendants were at his kraal fifty miles distant at the time the horses were alleged to have been stolen here in Dundee. The only contrary evidence comes from the police, whose attitude in the premises does not inspire my confidence. I ask that the appeal be entered and that this accused be released in bail pending the outcome."

Ben, whose command of Eng-

lish was quite adequate to allow him to understand most of what was being said, regarded Lawyer Smith with interest and approval. Here was a good white man, even though he had been in Natal only a few months and was sadly ignorant of the ways of the land. The magistrate scowled.

"Very well, Mr. Smith," he said. "It is the prisoner's right to take an appeal if he so desires. Bail is set at fifty pounds."

Ben's heart sank. The bail was prohibitive, as the magistrate very well knew. No Zulu could be expected to have in his possession any such princely sum as fifty pounds.

"I thank Your Worship," said Lawyer Smith. "Convinced as I am of my client's innocence, I shall be glad to furnish the bail myself."

"Oh, as you please," snapped the magistrate.

Lawyer Smith was already at the clerk's desk, counting out bank notes. Sergeant Ker, very correct and trim in starched police khaki, turned disgustedly away as the native warder lifted the bar of the dock and Ben walked out of the courtroom a free man—free and with a wonderful new set of ideas taking form in his ingenious mind.

Outside, in the bright sunshine of freedom, the big Zulu thanked Lawyer Smith from a full heart for his confidence in Ben's virtue, and assured him that he would never have occasion to regret it.

"Ben good boy," he said earnestly. "You will see."

He thereupon took himself off at a fast trot, for he had much to do. His companions, he was sure, would not have lingered in Dundee after being freed; they would have betaken themselves to the gang's appointed rendezvous at Jake's kraal, there to consider what to do next. Poor fellows, they thought they had lost their leader and would be sadly bewildered: but a new dawn of hope was on the way. By evening, Ben had gathered two items of information. He had learned that Lawyer Smith had a clerk, who lived alone in a small house not far from the jail, and he had learned that this clerk locked up the lawyer's office every evening and took the keys home with him, later going over to the hotel for his supper. As soon as the clerk had done so on this particular evening, Ben pried open the back door of the house and found the keys. He went straight to the office, let himself in, and opened the safe—combination locks not being widely used in Natal in that year 1903. In the safe he found money—well over a hundred pounds. He grinned happily: he had been quite right, a man who could produce fifty pounds with so princely an air must naturally have a great deal more money hidden away. Ben stuffed the money into the

pocket of his blue jean trousers, possessed himself also of a .38 caliber revolver which he discovered in a desk drawer, thoughtfully relocked the safe and departed. Without a moment's delay he took the road for De Jager's Drift (ford) on the Buffalo River, near which Jake's kraal was located. It would be a long trip afoot, but on reflection Ben decided not to steal a horse in Dundee that evening, since the Nongqai were doubtless annoyed at his release and might be on the lookout for such an attempt.

As he expected, when he reached the kraal the following afternoon he found his five pals assembled there drinking millet beer (utshwala) and eating mealies. They greeted him with astonishment—since they supposed him now to be snug in a cell in Dundee Jail. Astonishment gave way to acclaim when he displayed his newly acquired wealth.

"This is nothing," Ben told them airily, "to what we shall presently have. We are all going to be rich men and possess many cattle and many wives. I, Ben, have learned lessons which I shall teach you and which shall bring us these gains."

They clamored eagerly for enlightenment.

"The first lesson is," Ben announced, "that while our own people have a proper respect for muti, and remain silent as to the doings of any who are protected by the spirits, the white man has no understanding of these matters. It was thus that I came near going to jail today. Therefore, we must never allow a white man to live who could give evidence against us."

This sentiment was received with tumultuous applause.

"The second lesson is," Ben continued, "that to the white man's way of thinking, to be elsewhere than the place of crime is committed is the best of reasons why one may be held to be innocent. Therefore let us always move with great speed. Let us steal horses, ride them till they drop, go the rest of the way on foot if need be, do what we came to do, steal other horses and go to the next place. Let us move fast, steal much and steal often. Soon the Nongqai will be unable to believe that one gang has done all that we shall be doing."

Prolonged, stormy applause.

"Finally," Ben went on, "wherever we go let us take all the keys we can find, such as those I have here. Keys are most useful. White men believe that when they have turned a key, their possessions are secure. If we have enough keys, we shall soon be able to open many doors and strong boxes. Now let me tell you where we shall go first, for I have made a plan to which I have given much thought, and there are many places I have long had in mind where good things are to be had."

They listened eagerly while Ben explained his great plan, which was based on the fact that northern Natal was at that time studded with isolated stores, much like the country stores of sparsely settled parts of rural America. These stores were invariably kept by white men, since there existed no Zulus or other local blacks with sufficient education and commercial gumption to operate a store successfully. There could be no doubt, as Ben explained, that a white man who took in money each day for the goods he sold must accumulate wealth very rapidly.

"We shall leave here as soon as the sun sets," Ben announced, "and go down river to the next drift, where there is a farm from which we can steal horses. Then we shall ride on to Vant's Drift; there are two stores there."

"We do not need to walk ten miles to the next drift," Jake suggested. "There is a farmer just across the river here who has many horses."

"No, no," cried Ben. "This is our rendezvous, we must not give the neighborhood a bad name. We start by walking; perhaps we shall never need to walk again."

Shortly before noon on the following day the six Zulus on their stolen horses were approaching Vant's Drift.

"Let us dismount here, before we are seen," Ben advised. "Jake, you have said you know how to handle this short gun: hide it under your shirt. Naturally I understand such matters far better than you, but it is well for you to gain experience."

The truth was that none of the gang had ever fired a revolver before, but no Zulu—and least of all Ben—could admit unfamiliarity with any weapon.

Taking Jake and Vel with him, while the other three stayed in the bush holding the horses, Ben headed for the nearer of the two stores, which was owned by an ex-soldier named Codd. Codd was alone in the store when the three Zulus walked in. Ben asked for a pair of shoes. Codd bent over and picked up a couple of pairs from behind the counter; as he straightened, Ben grunted and Jake pulled out the revolver and fired at Codd point blank. He missed, and Codd vaulted over the counter and charged at Jake. Jake fled toward the rear of the store; Codd grabbed a shotgun and turned on the other two, who promptly dived through the plate-glass store window into the road. Codd took after Jake, who ran out the back door; all three Zulus plunged into the bush and were out of sight by the time Codd reached the road.

"That white man must have a very strong muti," Ben an-

nounced, when they had regained their horses and put a few miles between themselves and Vant's Drift. "But it is nothing to worry about now. The nearest police station is at Nqutu, which is four hours' ride. We shall ride in the opposite direction, and go to Umvunyana, where there is a much larger store than the one we have just left."

Near Umvunyana they waited all the next day, tethering their horses near the river. "This time we will not show ourselves while the sun is up," Ben told them. "We must wait for evening. Also there is a woman who lives near this place who knows me and might talk." They spoke with several passing natives during the day, and by discreet questions found that the store was owned by an Englishman named Hunt, who kept two native "boys" on the premises. (All male native servants of whatever age were called "boys".)

"We must shoot the Englishman at once," Ben said, "and make sure neither of those boys gets away to give the alarm."

That evening Hunt was sitting on the edge of a table near the front door of the store—which he had already locked for the day—when he heard a knock. He was eating a sandwich; with his free hand he reached out and pulled back the bolt, calling out "Come in". The door slammed against the wall under the thrust of Ben's shoulder. Ben jammed his revolver muzzle against Hunt's outstretched neck and pulled the trigger. Hunt collapsed on the floor.

A howl of terror from the rear of the store—a crash—Ben bounded over his dying victim and seized a Basuto "boy" who had entered with a steaming teapot just in time to witness the murder of his master. As Ben grabbed him the Basuto yelled again—words this time—"Run, Molapo! Get help!" Ben hit him across the mouth with the butt of the revolver: Sam and Muzzy, who were right behind Ben, grabbed the unhappy Basuto and began beating him.

"Wait," shouted Ben. "Let us make sure of the other boy first."

"Jake is outside, he will catch him," said Sam.

Outside, somebody yelled; there was a flurry of receding hoofbeats. Jake stormed through the door, bleeding from a cut on his forehead.

"There were four of them!" he squalled. "They attacked me with knob-kerries! I knocked three of them down but the other found a horse and rode away."

"There was one man with one knob-kerrie, and he took you unawares," Ben retorted scornfully. "Let it be so. He will need two hours to fetch the Nongqai from Nondweni sta-

tion, by which time we shall be far away. As you see—" he gestured toward Hunt, gasping out his life on the floor—"—as you see, my part in this matter has been attended to properly. This white man will give no evidence against us."

"There is a strong box here, made of iron," said Muzzy, who had gone behind the counter.

"Then there will be a key," answered Ben. He squatted beside the dying Hunt, feeling his shirt pockets—"Ah. Here it is, on a cord around his neck." He broke the cord with a savage jerk, stood up with a blood-stained brass key in his hands.

"Now," he said to Jake, "show the **muti** which you have with you to that Basuto and tell him what will happen to him if he talks to the Nongqai, while I open the safe."

Ten minutes later they were riding furiously into the night, bearing with them the money from the safe, another revolver they had found behind the counter, and the brass key darkened with Hunt's life-blood.

"A Zulu c r i m i n a l," pronounced Inspector Hamilton of the Natal Police, "almost always sticks to one type of crime, repeating it over and over. I'll find it hard to believe that a gang of horse thieves have turned their hands to murder a n d burglary. Anyway you aren't sure the men who killed Hunt were Zulus."

"The Basuto boy, Molapo, who rode to Nondweni to give the alarm said they were," Sergeant Ker insisted.

"But he admitted he didn't get a good look at them, and now he won't talk at all," retorted the Inspector.

"That was after the other Basuto—the one they beat so badly—had said three or four words to him when we arrived at the store," said Ker. "You know what that means — this damned **muti** business. We had **muti** trouble when we tried that gang of horse thieves: that's why most of 'em got off."

"Not the first time **muti** has silenced a black witness," the Inspector said. "Proves nothing."

"There are the two other matters, sir," Ker pointed out. "Poor Hunt was killed by a bullet from a .38 caliber revolver, which is not a Zulu weapon: I've never heard of a Zulu carrying a revolver before. The only recent report of such a weapon being missing is the theft of Mr. Smith's revolver right here in Dundee, the night after our precious horse thieves were acquitted—except for that rascal Ben who was bailed out on appeal by Smith himself. The second is that the key of Hunt's safe, which he carried on a cord around his neck, is missing; we found the broken cord, it was torn away violently. Smith's office keys are missing too. Did you ever hear of a Zulu making

a practice of stealing keys before, sir?"

"Can't say I have," agreed Hamilton. "But you have no proof that it was a Zulu or Zulus who took Smith's keys and revolver and robbed his safe."

"No, sir. But we do know that three Zulus, one of whom had a revolver, came into Codd's store at Vant's Drift and tried to murder Codd, just the day before Hunt was killed. Unfortunately, Codd has shut up his store and gone off to Durban —whether for good or not I don't know. I'd like to have had him get a look at Ben and company."

"Oh, come, Ker," said the Inspector. "You're making pictures to yourself. There's no proof of any connection at all between the Hunt murder, the attack on Codd and the Smith burglary. Unless you're trying to tell me that we've got a Zulu master-mind criminal on our hands, which I am just not going to believe. There never was any such thing and there never will be."

Ker's jaw set stubbornly.

"Very well, sir. We've still got a murder to solve," he said.

"Get on with it, then," snapped the Inspector.

Ker got up, saluted, spun on his heel and went out through the street door of the dingy little Dundee police office. He was thoroughly angry—as much with himself as with the Inspector, because he could not find more persuasive language in which to express his convictions.

It had been pure luck that Ker had been at Nondweni station when Hunt's Basuto boy had galloped in with the news of his master being shot. Zulus, he said. Three — four — maybe five Zulus. He had sounded positive. But later, after the other Basuto had spoken to him, he had become vague: very vague. The other boy would not talk at all—except for one remark. When Ker had told him that Hunt was dead, he had muttered: "My master have very strong **muti**, too. My master's **muti** follow the man who killed him." Pressed to explain, he had nothing more to say. But the words stuck in Ker's mind. He might never know what they meant—there was no hope of getting any native to talk much about **muti** — yet somehow he had a feeling that one day he would know the answer.

Well — what next? Lawyer Smith had said he had taken down the numbers of some of his bank-notes: possibly he'd found the memorandum by this time. Ker started across the street toward Smith's office; as he did so, he saw a tall Zulu in faded blue jeans and a new white shirt come out of the lawyer's door. It was Ben. Ben grinned broadly as he recognized the policeman, touched the visor of his shabby cap in a gesture of respectful greeting

as he walked coolly away in the general direction of the railroad station.

"I see your friend Ben has been calling on you, Mr. Smith," Ker said as he entered the office.

"Yes," said the lawyer, not too cordially. "I hope you're not persecuting the poor fellow. He came to thank me again for bailing him out, and to assure me that he'd be on hand when the Appeals Court meets in Pietermaritzburg. He had me count out the number of days for him; he doesn't understand calendars. I told him I would appear before the court in his behalf; his gratitude was a touching thing to hear, Sergeant."

"Did he say how he was spending his time in the meanwhile?" Ker inquired.

"Looking for work," the lawyer answered. "He mentioned having relatives near Meran, who might help him find a job."

I wonder if he bought that white shirt with money from your safe, my young friend, Ker was thinking. Then he had a sudden idea. He took hasty leave of the lawyer, hurried back to the police station, and found a Zulu police trooper who had done some work for the C.I.D.

"Beni Mhlanga is wearing a new white shirt," Ker told the trooper. No doubt he has a new woman. Do you think you can find out where she lives?"

The trooper grinned.

"Beni Mhlanga has a new woman every week," he said. "Nevertheless, the sergeant bwana is quite right. He would not have bought a white shirt unless he had a very new woman. I go now to make inquiries."

It was just a chance: but Ker had never known of a Zulu who took to stealing who did not use his loot to help him along in his courtships.

Three days later, the telegraph wires into Dundee began to hum with messages from outlying towns and stations. First, the store at Laffnie's Drift had been broken into, the till robbed and two of Laffnie's horses — including a valuable stallion—stolen. The next morning, Matteson's store at Vant's Drift — just across the road from Codd's and thirty miles from Laffnie's—had been burglarized: no money was in the till, but some canned meat, two concertinas and several bolts of cloth were missing. There were signs that the burglars — who appeared to have been mounted — had prowled around Codd's store too, and tried to pry off some of the boards that had been nailed over the broken front window. The next night, the door of a miner's bunkhouse near Vryburg had been pried open; intruders had eaten the cold roast meant for the miners' dinner and stolen their Sunday clothes and several bottles of

gin. Sergeant Ker, riding from place to place, found little in the way of solid clues. He came back to Dundee to face a red-faced, angry Inspector.

"What the hell are you about, Ker? The whole country's in an uproar, demanding to know what we're doing to protect law-abiding citizens from this crime wave."

"I'm doing my best, sir." A lame reply, but Ker had no better to offer. He had only one bit of luck: his native trooper reported that Beni Mhlanga's new woman lived in a kraal near Meran. That was where Ben had told the lawyer he might be going. It would be just like Zulu impudence to tell the truth, or part of it, with the idea that it would never be believed. Also the theft of the concertinas suggested that the entertainment of ladies might be on the program. There was no solid evidence that the marauders had been Zulus: but in Ker's mind, conviction solidified. He saw to it that the Meran area was visited by patrols.

They rode, all six of them, gaily toward Meran in the gathering dusk. Ben's woman would be there; there would be others, and in the sacks on their saddlebows the happy Zulus had the concertinas, many yards of gay cotton cloth, irresistible to Zulu women, and square bottles of the white man's gin. Suddenly, out of the shadows, there loomed a mounted figure wearing the unmistakable helmet of the Nongqai. Panic seized the would-be revellers: they drove their horses past the trooper at a mad gallop, heading for the kraal where Ben's woman lived. The trooper pursued for a little way, shouting for them to halt. Then he turned back.

"He will return with others," Ben said. "I shall go to my woman, but we must get a new **muti**, for clearly the virtue of the old one has expired. There is a witch doctor in this kraal. We must talk with him at once. None of us must be here when the sun rises and the Nongqai come in force."

They were gone before dawn, leaving the tongueless corpse of an unlucky sheepherder beside the road for the police to find.

"Let us scatter, and meet again at the old cattle kraal on the mountain above Jake's place at De Jager's Drift," were Ben's orders. Ben caught a freight train, rode to Glencoe Junction near Dundee, walked into Dundee and stole a horse from a livery stable, rode to De Jager's Drift. The others came in one by one: during the next night they conveyed their loot to the old cattle kraal high on the Doornberg, where the approach of danger could be seen a long way off. Ben had news for his friends. He had heard in Dundee that the white people were going to have a big dance at the Victoria Hotel

the next Saturday night. Ben had had opportunity to observe such affairs. They offered good prospects to the enterprising.

On the evening of the dance, the gang rode cautiously into Dundee in pairs, not keeping together so as to avoid attention. Near the hotel they dismounted; Ben, Jake and Muzzy strolled up to the place, taking note that the music was loud and clear and that everyone was on the dance floor. There were plenty of black servants in the corridors and service rooms; no one took any notice of the three Zulus. They hastily went through the clothing left in the cloak room, getting quite a little money; they stole several bottles of liquor from the bar, and cleaned out the dining room — set now for a late supper — of the whole of its silver, which they dumped into a tablecloth. With this, they hastened to a shop kept by an Arab in a nearby street, roused out the proprietor and sold the silver to him for eight pounds. Seeing no police around, they went on to a butcher's shop, found a key among their now considerable assortment which would open the door, looted the till, stole some meat, and then plundered an adjoining store where they took clothes and shoes.

"Our new **muti**," said Ben as they rode out of town, "is — as you see — very powerful. Also you have a leader who makes no mistakes. We are already rich. We shall soon be richer."

They hurried back to their mountain hangout, buried their loot, enjoyed a hearty binge on the stolen liquor, and gave thought to what to do next.

"I learn lessons from all that happens," Ben told them. "Consider the Arab shopkeeper to whom we sold the silver. He was not an honest man, for there were marks on the silver that told him it was stolen. Therefore, he gave us little; such a rascal must amass much wealth. Let us think where there are other stores kept by Arabs."

They thought of three within riding distance. Two Arab proprietors, confronted by leveled revolvers, made haste to hand over money and jewelry. A third tried to slam his heavy wooden shutters in the face of the Zulus. Him they beat as well as robbed, and for good measure set fire to his shop as a warning to others.

The whole of northern Natal was up in arms by this time. The police were under attack both in the press and by their political superiors. Sergeant Ker was alone in his stubborn belief that all these depredations were being committed by one gang. The accepted official view was that so widely spread a series of outrages must be the result of generally "disturbed" conditions among the native population. There was talk of

calling for troops, and of swearing the whole able-bodied white male population as special constables. Ker plodded on, his head bloody but unbowed. From the Arab shopkeepers he was able to get sufficiently clear descriptions of the robbers to confirm his own suspicions, but not to convince his Inspector or the brilliant minds of the C.I.D. with whom the district was now swarming. The troubles of the police were not eased by the fact that Ben and his friends, on their way home from raiding the last of their Arab victims, stopped off at the farm of a Mr. Wiltshire, a member of the Legislative Assembly of Natal, and stole his carriage horses.

Ker had never lost sight of the date when Ben was due to appear before the Appeals Court in Pietermaritzburg, and had planned to be there and take Ben into custody personally if his sentence was confirmed. He was certain that Ben was the leader of the gang; with him safely behind bars for two years, the others might be dealt with one by one. But when the day came, Ker was on patrol over toward Vryheid — on what turned out to be a false alarm, of which there were now a dozen a day.

Ben, however, arrived in Pietermaritzburg promptly on schedule, traveling respectably in a "kaffir coach" on the railway. To his dismay, — and Lawyer Smith's—the Appeals Court made short work of his plea. Sentence confirmed, appellant remanded to custody. Ben was handed over to a native bailiff, who led him out into the corridor and invited him to be seated on a bench while a warder was summoned from the Prisons Department to take charge of him. No doubt this laxity was due in large part to Lawyer Smith's presentation to the court of Ben's many virtues and his fidelity to his promises, and in part to Ben's own demeanor—smiling, humble and submissive to authority. Ben had not, however, neglected to make provision against an adverse turn of fortune. He had with him, in a small sheepskin pouch, a portion of the **muti** which had been prepared by the witch doctor at Meran from the tongue of the murdered sheepherder. He now displayed this precious talisman to the Bantu bailiff, with appropriate remarks. The bailiff's black face turned a dull gray: he placed his hands over his eyes, indicating that he saw nothing. Ben a r o s e from the bench, strolled to the end of the corridor, down the stairs and out into the street. Having appeared in court barefoot, as a part of his affectation of poverty and humility, he stole a pair of shoes from an Arab shop, thereafter hastening out of the city to a point where the railway line to the north ascended a

steep grade. Toward evening he climbed aboard a laboring freight train which conveyed him back to his old stamping grounds.

Ben was now, of course, a fugitive from justice who could be taken into custody on sight: a very different situation from being a mere suspect in the mind of a police sergeant who had not yet convinced his superiors of the validity of his suspicions. But this was a difference which Ben did not understand at all. He was sublimely confident both in his own powers and in the protection of the spirit world symbolized by his **muti.** The only deference he paid to the efforts of the police was to shift his area of operations to a new locale.

To his devoted followers at the mountain hangout, he triumphantly proclaimed the inability of the white man's law to retain him in custody and announced that he had learned a new lesson for their guidance.

"Hotels," he pointed out, "are places where white men go who have money to pay their way. Also they contain much valuable property which is poorly watched, as we have already seen at Dundee. There are two fine hotels at Vryheid. Let us obtain horses and go there."

Not wishing to risk approaching Vryheid — a fairly important town — in broad daylight, they paused at the smaller town of Blood River Poort, where during the night they looted the Blood River Hotel thoroughly, even snatching the blankets off a sleeping married couple. They made contact toward morning with wandering Zulus from a nearby kraal who informed them that a number of rifles had been confiscated from their chief and were locked up in the magistrate's court at Vryheid. The chief, these Zulus affirmed, would pay a high price in cattle and women for the recovery of the weapons, which Zulus were forbidden by law to possess.

"Bid your chief be of good cheer," cried Ben. "The spirits are watching over his affairs, since they have brought his trouble to the attention of one who can provide the remedy."

A little farther on, the gang came upon a deserted kraal where Ben decided to hide out during the day; they had plenty of food and gin looted from the hotel. The gin stimulated Ben's imagination — the price offered by the chief for the recovery of the rifles was a rich one, but first could they not put these weapons to another use?

"There is a bank in Vryheid," Ben pointed out. "We have never robbed a bank. We have no keys that are suitable for opening bank doors; also banks use large safes that are hard to open unless they can be taken away to a quiet place where there is time to work on them. But now we shall have rifles.

With rifle shots, we can break the locks on the bank door. Then we can roll out the safe on its little wheels and put it in a wagon. Once we have it out in the bush, I shall find a means of opening it."

"But we have no wagon," protested Sam.

"Fool, do I not know that?" cried Ben. "We shall procure one tomorrow."

They did, from a Basuto driver who was returning from Vryheid to the farm where he was employed after having delivered a load of produce in the town. Muzzy wanted to kill the Basuto, saying that a man who had lost two horses and a wagon would have to raise an alarm lest he be accused of having hidden them away for his own benefit. Ben vetoed this: the Basuto were a clannish people with a long memory for blood feuds, and this one had shown fright at sight of the **muti.** Unfortunately for Ben, this Basuto was a Christian, as were many of his tribe, and had no regard for **muti.** He was, however, smart enough to see that his life depended on pretending that the thing scared him stiff. As soon as the Zulus were out of sight with the wagon, the Basuto set out at a run to tell his employer what happened.

Happily ignorant of this, the gang — after hiding out in the bush all day — rode into Vryheid shortly after nightfall. While his companions waited nearby with the horses and the stolen wagon, Ben went boldly up to the front door of the two-story frame building which housed the magistrate's court and began trying various keys. He had tried three or four without success when a voice just behind him said sharply:

"Here, you man, why are you trying to open that door?"

Ben jerked around to face a native constable, with two others looming just behind him.

"I have a complaint to lay before the magistrate," Ben informed the constable. "I am a poor man, and I seek justice for a great wrong."

"You fool," said the constable, "do you expect to find the magistrate holding court at night? Go away and come back in the morning."

"As the **induna** commands," said Ben submissively, giving the constable the title of the war-leader of a Zulu tribe.

"Be off with you, then," the flattered constable commanded.

Ben sped back to his friends.

"The courthouse is too well watched," he reported. "We cannot get the rifles, so we shall rob the hotel instead of the bank. Leave the wagon, we have no further use for it."

Ben and Muzzy got into the President Hotel by the servants' entrance without difficulty, and were cleaning out the silver closet in the butler's pantry when outside, several church bells began to ring.

It was the 9:00 p.m. curfew, the signal for all natives to be off the streets! This old rule hadn't been enforced in this part of Natal for years, but Ben realized instantly what the bells meant. Somebody had brought the old rule back to life.

"Out with you," Ben barked at Muzzy. "Run for the horses."

Muzzy took off, straight out through the front door. Ben was just far enough behind him to see Muzzy run right into the arms of a patrol of native police on the street corner. Ben swerved, ran around the hotel and dodged through an alley into the street where the wagon had been left, with its team tied to a tree. He trotted on to the next corner, peered cautiously around the end of a store building. Across the way, three native constables were just dragging the struggling Muzzy into the police station, a small frame structure with a broad porch where a lantern swung. Inside, Ben could see the helmet of a white policeman. This was bad. Ben didn't think Muzzy would blab, but in Muzzy's pocket was the revolver with which Hunt had been murdered.

He dashed back to the wagon, loosed the horses, climbed aboard and laid on the whip. The startled team — they were only half-broken anyway — took off at a gallop, Ben lashing them on with whip and the most frightful Zulu war cries his lungs could provide air for. Round the corner he steered them and past the police station, the iron-tired wheels making a terrific clatter on the rounded cobblestones as a sort of background for Ben's howling. Out from the police station dashed half a dozen figures — somebody shouted "Halt or I fire!"—here was the next corner, Ben yanked the team around it, the wagon skidding drunkenly on the stones. Two blocks ahead was the tree-filled park where the riding horses were hidden.

There they were — and the rest of the gang, already mounted. Ben leaped from the wagon and into an empty saddle, and the gang (all except Muzzy) clattered out of Vryheid amid a crackle of futile pistol shots. Before morning they were back in the abandoned kraal near Blood River Poort, the appointed rendezvous in case of any mischance. An hour after they arrived, Muzzy rode in on a stolen horse; beholding him, Ben laughed in triumph.

"None who ride with me need fear the Nongqai!" he cried. "As you see, here is our brother who was in their hands, but I distracted the fools so that he escaped while they ran to see what the noise was."

"They took the little gun from me," said Muzzy sadly.

"What matter, so long as they have no man to bring before a judge and say, Here is the man who had this weapon in

his pocket?" laughed Ben. "Nevertheless it may be well for us to scatter, and make our way separately to our own kraal on the mountain. The Nongqai will be looking for a band of men; they will not trouble themselves with lone wayfarers. Once we are safe we can send for a witch doctor and make fresh **muti**, so that we shall continue to have the protection of the spirits. But first, let us return to Blood River Poort and see if we can find more gin in the hotel, so that we may refresh ourselves for the journey."

Sergeant Ker of the Natal Police, worn and weary with long hours of riding, short hours of sleep and the increasing weight of official disapproval, swung his spare body off the morning train to the platform at Vryheid, and headed for the police station with long, eager strides.

In his mind, amid the gray ashes of frustration, glowed an ember of hope renewed.

It had begun to glow the night before, when the telegraph had brought word to Dundee from the station sergeant at Vryheid of a farmer who had ridden in to report the theft of a wagon and team from one of his Basuto hands by a gang of six mounted Zulus. Unfortunately the farmer had wasted the best part of the day trying to track the wagon himself, without success, before it had occurred to him to notify the police. The Basuto had given an intelligent description of the men—a description which fitted Ben, Sam, Jake, Muzzy, Nick and Vel very closely. He had also stated that they had attempted to scare him into silence by showing him **muti** and threatening him with revolvers. To that was to be added the report of the robbery at the Blood River Hotel, so similar to what had happened at the Victoria Hotel in Dundee. The gang would just about have had time to get from Blood River Poort to the spot where they had held up the Basuto, allowing time out to consume the liquor stolen at Blood River.

This information came to Sergeant Ker at a fortunate moment. In the temporary absence of Inspector Hamilton in Pietermaritzburg, Ker was in command of the whole district. On the well-known theory that one might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb — he had a shrewd idea that Inspector Hamilton had not gone to headquarters to speak well of one Sergeant Ker — he had ordered out patrols on every road. But first he had tried to think out what the next move of the gang might be. They had stolen a wagon. What need could they have for a wagon, except to carry away loot too heavy to be borne off on horseback? Looking at the map, the town

of Vryheid seemed the most likely place they could expect to lay their hands on enough booty to make up a wagon-load. Sergeant Ker had thereupon alerted the Vryheid police to special vigilance that night, and had ordered the strict observance of the dormant curfew regulations. He did not believe the gang would succeed in getting into Vryheid and out again with a wagon-load of loot under such circumstances. But they might escape individually; he did not underrate their slipperiness, it had been too often demonstrated. In that case, they might be scared enough to scatter, with some appointed rendezvous in mind (Ker had not yet discovered the mountain kraal on the Doornberg). Therefore Ker had ordered his patrols to be on the lookout not only for a band, but also for single Zulus, ahorse or afoot; any such Zulus who could give no proper account of themselves were to be taken into custody. Sergeant Ker was well aware of the view which would be held of these high-handed orders by the well-meaning officials of the Department of Native Affairs. His only excuse now would be success, and somehow he felt that success might be just within his grasp.

Sergeant Edwards, at Vryheid, had resented getting such detailed orders from a sergeant only a few months senior to himself, so he hadn't troubled to report Muzzy's capture and subsequent escape, or the revolver found on him, or the wagon hoorah by which Ben had insured Muzzy's getaway. This news Ker found waiting for him when he arrived at the Vryheid police station.

"How many people have handled this revolver?" he demanded.

"Myself," said Edwards. "I've kept it wrapped up, as you see it, according to the new regulations."

It was only that year that the Henry system of fingerprinting had been adopted by the Natal Police, and its use was far from universal as yet; most judges still refused to accept fingerprint evidence as at all conclusive. There were no prints of Ben or any of his pals on record.

Ker was already busy with his pocket knife, unscrewing one of the side plates of the revolver butt. Lawyer Smith had informed Ker that he had no notion of what the manufacturer's number on his gun might be; but after acquiring some idea of the light fingered ways of Africa, he had taken the precaution to scratch his initials on the inside of the righthand butt-plate.

"Ah," said Ker. There were the initials — W H W.

So far so good. This was Smith's gun. But there was still no proof that this was the same .38 caliber revolver with

which Hunt had been murdered. The science of ballistic identification was as yet unknown. The next move was to send the gun to the C.I.D. at Pietermaritzburg and have them examine it for fingerprints. Eliminating Sergeant Edwards' prints — Ker had been careful to get none of his own on the weapon — Ker could then start looking for a man whose prints matched one or more of those on the revolver. That might take some doing. (Ben's instinct had been right on this point, though Ben knew nothing of fingerprints. The gun without the man didn't matter too much!).

"Well," said Edwards sourly, "you've got the whole bloody district turned upside down looking for these famous Zulus of yours. I only hope something comes of it."

Over toward the railroad station, a locomotive whistle blared.

"Something will come of it," said Ker. "I've a feeling we're getting close. When's the next down train? I'd like to get that gun wrapped up properly and on its way to headquarters."

"'Bout an hour," said Edwards. "That one you just heard'll be the northbound goods train from Glencoe and Dundee. I'll see to wrapping the gun, if you like."

"Much obliged," said Ker. He got up and walked to the door.

Shod hooves clunked on the cobblestones. Ker, presentiment stirring within him, stepped out on the board sidewalk.

Ten feet away, Beni Mhlanga was walking toward him.

Alonside Ben, Trooper Smith of the Dundee detachment walked his horse; a drawn revolver was in his right hand, laid across the pommel of the saddle so that the muzzle covered Ben. Ben was wearing what had once been a well-cut English suit of grey tweed, now sadly dilapidated; his feet were bare.

"Good morning, sergeant bwana," he said with a cheerful grin.

"Good morning, Ben," answered Ker. "All right, Smith. Let's have it."

"I hope I've done right, sergeant," said the trooper, swinging from his saddle. "I found this Zulu fast asleep on the grass by the bank of the Buffalo River, just this side of the road bridge near De Jager's Drift. There was a half-empty gin bottle beside him. I had some trouble waking him. When I did, he said his name was Charlie Mtatu and he was walking to Glencoe to look for work on the railroad. I searched him. He had fifteen pounds six on him in coin and banknotes, and a dozen keys of all sorts. He said he'd earned the money working for a farmer; the keys he claimed he'd just picked up here and there to make muti. He swore he'd never seen the gin bottle before, but gin was

strong on his breath. I arrested him for possession of liquor: that charge'll stick anyway. In view of your orders, sergeant, I thought the other circumstances were suspicious enough that I'd be warranted in flagging down the goods train and loading this man and my horse aboard to bring him up here and report to you in person. He tried twice to give me the slip on the way; that's why I've got my gun on him."

"You did exactly right, Smith," said Ker. "This man's name is Beni Mhlanga and among other things there's a High Court warrant out for him for escaping from custody in Maritzburg. Bring him along inside, I'd like to have a look at those keys."

"Ben good boy, sergeant **bwani**," said Ben earnestly. "No do anything bad."

He stood smiling and at ease by the table while Smith dumped the keys and money out of the handkerchief in which he'd wrapped them and set the gin bottle beside them.

Ker dropped into a chair, looking carefully at the keys. Three of them were attached to a small ring, with a round metal tag. He picked them up: the tag bore the initials "WHW".

"These are Lawyer Smith's keys, Ben," said Ker. "How did you get them?"

"Ben found them on street, sergeant **bwana**. Ben not know they belong to Lawyer Smith," was the bland reply.

So Ben is now hooked up with the gun, Ker reflected, looking at the other keys. Two or three ordinary iron door keys —wait, what's this? A big brass key, dulled by wear, with a dark stain on it. Ker had seen an exact duplicate of that key only a few days ago — Hunt's spare safe key, which had been found in his bedroom.

Then this one must be the key that Hunt had worn around his neck. He had been shot in the neck — the stain on the key might well be his blood.

Into Ker's mind came the recollection of words spoken by Hunt's Basuto store-boy: "My master have very strong **muti** — my master's **muti** follow the man who killed him."

Out of the mouth of babes — or Basuto boys —

"Beni Mhlanga, you have not done well," Ker said, speaking now in Zulu. "You say you have taken these things—" he waved a hand over the scattered keys —"to make **muti**. But these are things made by white men. Do you have no black man's **muti**, Beni Mhlanga?"

"I have **muti**," Ben said proudly. "I have strong **muti**."

"Show it to me," Ker demanded.

Ben lifted his hands to his neck, slipped a string over his head, laid on the table a small and extremely malodorous sheepskin bag. "Strong is right," sniffed Edwards.

"That is black man's **muti**, Beni Mhlanga," said Ker. "It has served you well. But you have been a fool. You have carried also the **muti** of one who seeks vengeance upon you, and that **muti** has been stronger than yours. It has brought you here, a prisoner."

"You speak folly," cried Ben. "I have no other **muti**. I said only that one day I might make **muti** of those things."

Ker rose swiftly to his feet.

"Look, Beni Mhlanga. Look well," he ordered. His forefinger pointed at the brass key. "You wear your **muti** on a string around your neck. Do you remember a white man who wore **this muti** on a string around his neck?"

Ben was no longer smiling: there was a glitter in his eyes. Ker flicked a glance at Smith, who stepped quickly to the door; Edwards was already standing by the window.

"It is only a key."

"That is not **muti**," said Ben.

"Your **muti** was once no **muti**, but only the tongue of an innocent man," retorted Ker. "It became **muti**, to you, when the witch doctor had called upon the spirits to make it so. This key became **muti**, Beni Mhlanga, when the blood of the white man whom you murdered at Umvunyana touched it, when his spirit entered into it."

Ben stood as though paralyzed, eyes staring, the gray cast of fear spreading across his face.

"When your victim lay dying at your feet," said Ker, "you tore that key from his neck, with his blood not yet dry upon it. With his dying breath he laid his curse upon you, Beni Mhlanga, and he bade his blood to cry out for vengeance upon you wherever you might go bearing this, his **muti**, this witness to your crime."

"You lie, Nongqai!" cried Ben. "He did not—"

Too late, Ben choked off that cry of admission.

"Tomorrow we shall see who is the liar and the murderer," said Ker sternly. "Tomorrow you and I, with others to bear witness, go to Umvunyana, to the place where you killed the Englishman named Hunt. There I shall take this key, this **muti** of vengeance, still stained with blood shed by your hand, and put it in the lock of his safe. If it opens the safe, Beni Mhlanga, you will hang."

Ben spread his hands in a gesture of resignation.

"Then," he said in a perfectly steady voice, "I am already a dead man."

After which, as Ker wrote in his final report, it was just a matter of cleaning up the details. A general alarm was sent out for the other members of the gang. Sam was picked up in Newcastle, Muzzy was nabbed trying to get away to Swaziland;

Jake, Vel and Nick were found at Jake's kraal. The hide-out on the Doornberg was discovered and quantities of loot unearthed. Fingerprints helped connect each of the gang with their shares of the wild orgy of crime. After a while, they all began to talk. Soon they were boasting.

In the due course of justice, Ben and Muzzy were hanged in the Central Jail at Pietermaritzburg for the murder of Hunt—Jake escaping the rope because his fingerprints were not identifiable on the gun. He and the others all received long prison sentences.

Beni Mhlanga went to the gallows with all a Zulu's traditional indifference to death, but a native warder who talked with him in his last hours reported him as deeply troubled. He had trusted his **muti** and the spirits who governed it. It had led him to great wealth, and protected him through many perils. Trusting it, he had even slept peacefully beside the road alone. Yet, he said to the warder, a dead white man had a stronger **muti** than his, which had brought the Nongqai upon him as he slept. It was better that he should leave a world in which such things could happen. One day in the spirit world, perhaps he would get his hands on those miserable witch doctors who had betrayed his trust.

A BALTIMORE AGENCY

Five years ago Avon E. Cooper, who had served with the Baltimore City police for eleven years and as the athletic director of the Police Boys Club for nine years, decided to start a detective agency in the city. Today Cooper has one of the top-ranking detective agencies in Baltimore, and one of the biggest and most successful negro detective agencies in the country. Some of the biggest firms in Baltimore are numbered among Cooper's multi-million dollar list of clients, including two dairy companies, an A&P supermarket trucking outlet, the Penn Motor Company, and still others. Besides offering guard and security protection, the agency provides services such as undercover investigative work, closed circuit TV systems, police dog protection, and personnel investigation. Customers include private individuals and lawyers, Maryland and Federal agencies, an Army department for which he has done secret work; guards are provided for both institutions and businesses, even for a country club. Cooper, a former Marine Sergeant, attended the University of Maryland's College of Special Studies' courses in detection work and the Institute for Maryland Law Enforcement Officers. "It wasn't easy," he agrees—but the agency has come far in these initial years.

dying room only

by . . . Stewart Sterling

Ben Pedley shifted uneasily in his ninth-row seat. He should have been getting a stitch in his side at Skid Ballou's burlesque routine — but the chief fire marshal couldn't work up so much as a grin.

It wasn't the fault of the show or the comedian. *At Ease* was a smash riot. Skid had knocked the audience in the aisles early in the first act; had kept them rolling whenever he was on-stage, since. Pedley had used the Coronet Theater's complimentary pass especially to see if Skid could still wow 'em as of yore.

Skid could; his loose-jointed gestures and the air of amiable idiocy with which he misunderstood everything said to him were good for the same yells of hilarity that had put his name on the marquee of the old Palace back in the days when the marshal had first been assigned to theater inspection.

But in the spasms of hilarity that rocked the house, Ben Pedley remained a glum minority of one as restless as an

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Arson is not just a word. There are people whose profession it is to set the fires investigated, often while still raging, by men such as Fire Marshal Ben Pedley, insurance investigators, and others. Mr. Sterling, long prominent in the field, is the author of TOO HOT TO HANDLE (Random House), I WAS A HOUSE DETECTIVE (Pyramid), and other novels.

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engine-house Dalmatian at a false alarm.

It wouldn't have irritated the marshal so much if he could have put a name to what was bothering him. It must be that file of Cases Pending on his desk down at the Municipal Building; certainly there could not be anything here in the theater to disturb him.

Long years of contact with conflagrations, before and after, had developed in Pedley a warning sense of smell as acute at that of a hungry horse at oats-time. But there was no indication of smoke here in this fire-trap—though there was plenty of heat on the stage.

Patsy Rinn, the satin-blonde torch-singer, swayed down to the foots for the first throaty bars of her smash-hit: *There's Only One Thing To Do.* Skid ogled the chorus and danced a step or two, off the beat. Back of the stars, evening-gowned ladies of line moved slim hips to the conga rhythm; followed Patsy's languid movements as she unhooked one shoulder-strap, began the tantalizing strip-finale to Act One.

Pedley slid to his feet, made his way back up the aisle. Over at the side, under a red *Exit* bulb, he caught a glimpse of a shiny-visored cap, brass buttons. Pedley elbowed past the row of standees.

"Howzit, Tom? Everything okay around?"

"All accordin' to Hoyle. Standpipe, hose, sprinklers backstage, buckets, lights. Say, looka; before the curtain gets down! That third hotcha from the right! I bet she's caused more high blood pressure—"

"Yair." The curtain dipped, rose, dipped again. The orchestra hit a peak on trombones and clarinets. A surge of applause swept over the house. The lights went up.

People poured into the aisles —khaki and navy blue uniforms, low-cut gowns and opera cloaks; laughing, babbling, pressing toward the lobby. Pedley saw none of them. He scowled up at the circled candelabra which gave the Coronet its name; an incandescent ring of bulbs high above the theater pit.

The illumination which beat down on the crowd thronging toward the rear of the theater was not clear and sharp; it wavered, shimmered like sunlight over a midsummer pavement.

"Tom!"

"Yuh?"

"You give her a feel, lately?"

"Before the curtain went up, sure."

"Hot air up there. Making the lights shimmy. Must be mushrooming from inside somewhere. Feel her, fast."

"Don't see any smoke, marshal!"

"That's a break. Nobody else does. Don't broadcast it."

"No *sir!*"

"I'll be in the front office. Snap into it." The marshal realized what it had been he'd sensed before the curtain dropped — the slight increase in temperature above the normal level of the crowded seats. In the summer, he wouldn't have been able to detect that slight difference—not with the theater's cooling system on. Even now he had to depend on his eyes for proof. But it must be here somewhere — the red tongue of peril . . . licking out, hungry for victims.

He stalked through the chattering mob in the lobby; rapped at the locked door beside the ticket window. Nobody turned the key, but after a moment a ground glass panel swung back behind the iron grillework and a plump red tomato of a face peered out.

"No more advance sale—"

Pedley held up a badge in his cupped palm. "Open up."

The face vanished. A lock snicked, chain rattled.

"Wish you didn't have to come around just when we're ready to close up, officer."

"I'm not a cop. From the Fire Department." Pedley closed the door behind him.

"That's another color of a horse." The box - office man smoothed back glossy hair with the tips of his fingers. "I thought you were going to do the License Commissioner's dirty work, make us tone down—"

"Going to make you close down. But quick."

"Now listen—"

"You've got a fire here."

"Good Lord!"

"Don't want a panic, too, do you?"

"No, but—"

"Close up, mister. Grab that phone. Get your stage manager. Have Skid Ballou or somebody make the announcement."

The plump man snatched at the handset, spun the dial. "H'lo? Claude there? Put him on. This's MacNemore—hurry it up . . ." He covered the transmitter with his hand, then asked, "Where's the blaze?"

Pedley moved around behind the ticket-rack, past the safe, to the phone-order desk. Rapidly he passed his hands over the kalsomined plaster. "Not far from here. Feel it yourself. Wall's hotter than a radiator. Better hustle your records out of here."

"Hope we got time," Sweat began to make the red face shiny. "H'lo? Claude? This's MacNemore. Listen, you got to get Ballou to make an announcement . . . To stop the show . . . Hell, no, I'm not stewed . . . There's a fire chief in here with me — says the building's burning up. Morris left about ten minutes ago. Don't give me an argument—"

Pedley took the phone away from him.

"Fire marshal talking. You going to get Skid to spiel? Or do I do it?"

"Wait a sec. I'll put Ballou on."

The comic's deadpan voice drawled: "No sign of any fire back here."

Pedley growled: "You wouldn't know if the seat of your pants was burning."

"Ah, I'm not so hot as all that. What you want me to say?"

"Tell 'em there's been an accident back-stage. No more show. All washed up. Save their stubs for a rainy afternoon—get *going!*"

"On my way."

Tom stuck his head in the box-office door. "The east wall, marshal. Right behind you. Paint's blistering, already."

"I caught it, Tom. Punch your box. Don't run." Pedley turned to MacNemore. "Wait until the crowd gets going before you take your stuff out. They see you leaving, someone's liable to start a rush."

The box-office man grabbed a suitcase, threw it on the phone-order desk, began to snatch bundles of tickets from the rack, toss them in the valise. "Don't let 'em pour water on the switchboard, or the motors. Or we won't be able to open tomorrow."

Pedley din't take time to answer. As he edged through the lobby he could hear Ballou *ad-libbing:*

". . . times when the old tradition that the show must go on has to be wrapped up in mothballs . . . hate to inform you that this is one of those times . . . unfortunate mischance . . . management will see your stubs are honored . . . appreciate your filing out quietly . . ."

The marshal followed the east wall along the side aisle toward the stage. The plaster grew blistering to his touch. Still there was no smell of smoke and no tell-tale line of orange to indicate a blaze.

He went past the *C* box, the *B*, stuck his head into the *A* box. Skid Ballou had finished his announcement, but calmly held his post at the center of the stage, spreading his palms with his usual blandness—shrugging with the familiar vacant buffoonery in answer to a couple of patrons, in the first row. That part of the audience which hadn't left their seats at intermission, began to straggle slowly up the aisle.

Pedley went up a short flight of steps, through a door, found himself back-stage in the wings. Two sweatered stagehands hauled at a box of handprops as if nothing had happened. Half a dozen chorus girls stood around trying to decide what Ballou's announcement had meant.

The east wall became suddenly cooler. Pedley hesitated.

Was the burrowing flame back there under the floor somewhere? The he saw a thin wisp of smoke. It drifted across the iron stairs leading up to the dressing rooms. It was no larger than the trailing plume from a cigarette—but smoking was strictly forbidden during a performance. Anyway, there was no one near the grayish feather of fumes. It came from a hole where an old gas-pipe emerged from the wall. He ran up the stairs.

The varnish on the pipe-rail was already sticky; the sprinkler heads would be about ready to pop. He cupped his hands, called sharply: "Outside, everybody! On the street! Grab your clothes! Beat it!"

He reached the second floor. "All out! Double time! Hit the pavement! Hike, now!"

The dressing-rooms were already empty except for a colored maid gathering up an armful of fluffy costumes. She sidled past Pedley, down the stairs.

A faint milky haze oozed out over the sill of a door at the corridor's end. Through the film he made out white letters:

KEEP OUT!
for
WARDROBE
MISTRESS
ONLY

The door was unlocked. When he slammed it back on its hinges a puff of hot air blasted at him—a layer of cottony smoke rolled lazily out around his knees.

The room was dark except for one glowing spot of orange on the opposite wall. It grew brighter in the second it took the marshal to get to it—stumbling over something hidden by the blanket of fumes at his feet. He stopped, felt warm flesh.

He dropped on one knee, got an arm beneath the girl, hoisted her over his shoulder in the fireman's carry. As he staggered erect, a finger of flame reached out tentatively from the hole that had been chipped in the plaster, touched his ear with a fiery claw. If it hadn't been for the girl, he'd have been badly burned — but the body across his shoulders, though it must have been seared with the heat, hadn't even twitched.

He knew who she was before he got her out into the light. There was no mistaking the satin-blonde locks that lay across his chest. And he'd made too many rescues in his time not to recognize deadweight when he carried it.

Patsy Rinn wasn't going to take any more encores . . . .

Clangour of brassy gongs and throbbing of the pumpers came distantly from the street; hosemen were piling through

the stage entrance when Pedley got to the stairs.

"Cellar pipe," he yelled. "Up here. Get it through into the east wall. Back room."

One man whirled, raced back. Another clumped up the iron steps, dragging a canvas serpent past the marshal.

Tom was herding the stage hands out into the cement alley beside the theater; he ran to help with the girl.

"M o n o x i d e get her, marshal?"

Pedley pulled a loop of pink striped fabric from around the comedienne's throat. "This got her." He dangled it from his fingers while he supported Patsy's shoulders; her head rolled loosely on his forearm. The peppermint-striped cloth was a girl's rehearsal romper. "Somebody n o o s e d it around her neck."

"For crying! Fire was started to cover up the murder, hah?"

"Might have been the other way 'round." Pedley reached out, grabbed an electric lantern from a helmeted man, flashed the beam full into the blonde's eyes. Her pupils didn't contract; no pulse throbbed under the curve of her jaw. "Looks like she's cold. Get the inhalator on her, anyway. Doc may be able to jolt her back with an injection. Heart h a s n ' t stopped more'n a few minutes."

Skid Ballou lunged past a fireman carrying an extinguisher. The loud-checked suit was still crisp and natty; the comic's face still ruddy with make-up, his hair glistening with grease. But his eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot; his lips grim. *"Pats!"* He got his arm around her. *"Pats ol' keed!"*

Pedley gripped the man's shoulder, roughly. "Give her a chance."

Skid let go of her, touched her face with his hand as Tom lugged her out into the alley. "Don't horse me. She hasn't a chance. She's gone upstairs." His face hardened, lines deepened under the grease-paint. "You won't go alone, Pats."

Pedley shook him, gently. "Break out of it."

Skid looked at him as if he didn't understand.

"You been teaming up with her a long time." The marshal didn't make it a question; these two had been a team as long as show business could remember.

"A long time," Skid repeated mechanically. He s e e m e d to bring Pedley into focus for the first time. "Yeah. We played a long run together. Big time. Orpheum, Poli's, Keith, Pantages." He added softly. *"Rinn and Ballou."* Still on the same bill. Next to closing."

The marshal tilted his head toward the alley. "It wasn't an accident." Booted firemen stumbled past dragging coupled canvas; men with crowbars plodded up the stairs. "She wasn't strangled—by smoke."

Skid n o d d e d calmly. "I

know." The tip of his little finger traced over his eyebrow penciling. "I know what happened. You don't have to tell me."

"I'm not telling you. I'm asking," said Pedley.

"Didn't you find him—with her?" The comedian frowned up in the direction of the dressing-rooms.

Pedley shook him again, hard. "She was on the floor of the wardrobe room when I got her. Who'd you expect I'd find with her?"

Skid put up a hand, loosened the grip on his arm. "Yeah. Sure. That would be the routine. He waited for her when she went up to change for the samba number." He moved toward the stairs, hesitantly.

"Hold it." Pedley was curt. "Wall might cave any minute. You wouldn't know what hit you. Not that you act as if you do, now. If you've an idea who choked the girl, say so." He dug his fingers into Skid's shoulder.

"You didn't see him! Then the rat's still up there!" Skid wrestled away, sprang for the stairs, took the treads three at a time. Pedley sped after him.

A puff of blackly evil smoke blossomed out from the hall, enveloped the actor. The fumes stung the marshal's throat and postrils, made his eyes stream. He groped blindly along the corridor to the wardrobe room. He collided with a blundering figure, but it wore a helmet and a rubber coat, carried an L-shaped nozzle.

Electric lanterns made a hazy loom in the wardrobe room. Men chopped at the wall, forced a thundering stream down into the hollow partition.

"Benzine, marshal." A white helmet emerged from the pall; a voice shouted in his ear: "Going like hell down below somewhere."

"Yair. Man run in here just now?"

"Didn't see anybody. Guy in the alley said they were all out."

"Okay." Pedley stumbled out over the pulsing hose; felt his way down to the wings, out into the alley.

A worried little man in shirtsleeves and a straw hat rushed at him. "Is that right? Skid says she was murdered!" He chafed his upper arms nervously, gnawed the stub of a cigar around in his mouth.

"Yair. Where's Skid?"

"He come tearing down. Just this second. An' hotfoots it, like crazy." He spat out a shred of tobacco. "I don't blame him. I'm going nuts myself. How'm I going to open tomorrow without Pats?"

"You the stage manager?"

"I wish to heaven I wasn't. How'm I going to replace my lead! Who'd want to knock off a swell trouper like Patsy!"

"What I want to know. Skid says he knows."

"Ah!" Claude hurled the stub

to the cement. "That's the old bunk. Morris wouldn't pull a lousy trick like that."

"Morris who?"

"S n y m i n. The man who makes with the checks."

"Why's Skid think your producer might put Patsy out of the way?"

"Ah!" Claude squinted; his lips came up at the corners but it wasn't a smile. "Skid's cracked on the subject of Pats. For a long time she was that way about him. But here lately she's been letting Morris buy her breakfasts. What the hell; that's nothing new. It's been going on ever since the break-in. And Morris is nuts about her, too. Why would *he* hurt her—any more'n Skid!"

"Don't ask me. I'm no Answer Man. Was Snymin here tonight?"

"Earlier, he was." The stage manager tugged distractedly at his lower lip. "He come around to tell me the count. About ten minutes before the curtain. I ain't seen him since."

"Say where he was going?"

"No. Hobe might know. Hobe MacNemore, the houseman."

The white-helmeted m a n clumped out of the stagedoor, bellowed: "Gimme another two-inch." The battalion chief was getting on with his job; Pedley didn't seem to be making much headway with his. He growled:

"How about Skid? You see him go up to his dressing-room after the curtain?"

"Uh, uh." Claude shook his head. "Skid don't change for opening Two. He might have come out here in the alley for a butt. But he didn't go up. You're screwy if you think Skid would harm a hair of her head. He'd of cut off his right hand, sooner."

"Not saying he did. See anybody who did go up to the dressing-rooms?"

"Nobody. Only Pats. Most usually the babes swarm right up, but tonight they were all gassing about the closing notice . . . .

"The show folding?"

"Not like it sounds. We been coining cash faster'n the mint. Morris'd keep it on for the duration, if he c o u l d. But it wouldn't click without Skid and Pats. And they're going—" he rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth—"they *were* going on the tank tour. One night stands around the army camps. For peanuts—and they been making anyway four figures per, both of 'em.

"So Morris, when he can't talk 'em out of it—why, he can't do otherwise than wrap it up in mothballs. He just gave with the notices tonight. So nobody's in a sweat to dress until they chew it over. Except Pats." He glanced up at sparks cascading over Broadway. "Morris was figuring on running the week out. We been turning them away every night. But now it don't look—"

"I wouldn't count on hanging the S.R.O. sign out again." Pedley's eyes were bleak. "It may take a while to get things cleaned up around here."

Policemen hurried into the alley, shoved the stagehands out to the firelines. Pedley went backstage again, climbed the stairs. An emergency smoke-blower was clearing the air; three streams were being forced down inside the east wall. Clouds of steam billowed up through the hole that had been chopped through the roof.

Pedley searched the wardrobe room, found a glass gallon jug with the cork missing; the label said:

SPOTZOFF
Keep Away From Flame
or Flatiron
Highly Inflammable

A dime-store screwdriver lay on a costume trunk; a white smear of plaster still stuck to the blade. He crumbled some of the plaster from the break in the wall, poured it into an old envelope, stuck it in his pocket.

Rows of costumes on the pipe-racks were dripping with water; he picked out another pair of bedraggled rompers from a hook behind the door. He crammed the rompers in his pocket, hurried down, through to the boxes. Firemen were hacking at the east wall. Plaster and gilded woodwork littered the carpeted aisle. Red-helmeted men from the insurance patrol flung tarpaulins over the upholstered seats. Oily clouds of evil saffron gushed into the lobby through box-office door and grille.

Hobe MacNemore, wiping his eyes, leaned weakly against the easel bearing a full-length color photograph of Patsy Rinn. A smudge of soot streaked his forehead; his hair hung damply over his eyes. Between his knees was the suitcase; his pockets bulged.

"Safe," he coughed, wiped his eyes again. "Damn safe fell through the floor. I thought the whole building was caving in."

"You hurt?" asked Pedley.

"Scared, mostly." The houseman grinned feebly. "Another couple minutes, I'd have had everything out." He patted the suitcase. "Got most of it. Anyhow, we won't be needing these ducats anymore."

"No. But somebody's due to get a one-way ticket out of this." Pedley sidled past a hoseman, into the box-office. No flame was visible; just a dull cherry glow from a gaping hole in the floor. The boards beneath his feet sagged spongily; he tripped over a box filled with sand, a tin dish; caught hold of the grille-work at the window.

"Old gas-pipes," the hoseman husked. "Junction with the main was right there under the safe. Beam burned through; down she went. That guy was lucky he didn't go with it."

"Can you hold her, now?"

"Steam'll do it." The fireman pointed to a maze of piping and lead-covered cables beneath the floor. "Water's following them down from up above. If she'd got any more of a head-start, though—would've been lousy."

"Yair." Pedley surveyed the wrecked ticket racks, the water-soaked strips of yellow, blue and purple pasteboard floating in a puddle at his feet. "Wouldn't have been so good if the crowd had been back in their seats before we caught it. Was the safe open, when she went down?"

"Nah. One of the insurance boys is down puttin' asbestos over it, anyhow."

The marshal backed out into the lobby. The stage manager was arguing angrily with MacNemore. A plainclothesman stood by with pencil and notebook. Claude wheezed up a thin trickle of smoke, choked out:

"We got to get hold of him, Hobe. Where the hell is he? He ain't at the Astor."

"Damn it, I don't know where he went." The box-office man fished a cigarette mechanically from his pocket, stared at it, threw it away without lighting it. "He didn't tell me where he was going."

The plainclothesman waggled his notebook at Pedley. "Hi, marshal. Trying to get a line on Snymin."

Pedley tapped MacNemore on the shoulder. "Where'd the big shot generally go to eat, fella?"

"Hell, most any place around. When he scoffed by himself." MacNemore looked out through the glass doors at the red-enameled apparatus by the curb. "When he took—somebody—with him, he usually went to the Beachcombers or Twenty-One."

Claude said: "Maybe he hops over to Johnnie's. For a quick one. If he was coming back for Patsy, after."

MacNemore mopped his face. "He wasn't. You know he wasn't, Claude. You know they been scrapping."

"Hell, that don't mean nothing." Claude was uncomfortable. "They was always squabbling over some little thing. That wasn't no reason for him to kill her."

"*Kill* her!" MacNemore whispered. "I thought you meant she'd been burned—" his voice trailed away.

Pedley said: "What was the wrangle about?"

The box-office man muttered gloomily: "It was about her going on this tank tour with Skid, I suppose. It stood to cost him plenty jack, way we've been grossing. But you'll have to ask Morris. I don't want to get mixed up in it. I didn't know there was anything like murder—"

The plainclothesman stuck

the notebook in his pocket. "Best thing to do is put in an alarm for this Snymin, I'd say."

The marshal nodded. "While you're at it, get a descrip of Skid Ballou for the teletype, too."

The battalion chief stuck his head into the lobby, hollered: "Break it up. That wall's going."

They went out to the street. The plainclothesman made for a call-box. Claude wandered over to the group of chorus girls huddled against the fire lines. MacNemore hefted the suitcase, dismally. "I got to park this in a safe place. And grab me off a drink. I'm shot."

"You look as if you could stand a slug." Pedley turned away, swiveled around. "What is the insurance picture? House all covered?"

"Yeah. Not by Morris. Company that owns the property."

"Snymin have any protection for the run of the show?"

"Not that I know of. He might have. But he couldn't have gotten enough to make up for what he'll lose now."

"No." Pedley agreed. "Where'll I find you if I need you?"

"Hotel Caldwell. Forty-fourth. But I'll be back when I've stached this stuff." MacNemore sighed glumly, trudged off heedless of pools of water or the spray from leaky couplings.

Pedley melted into the crowd on the opposite side of the street; kept nearly abreast of the box-office man. MacNemore turned down Eighth Avenue, went south a block, wheeled east. Halfway toward Broadway he vanished into a *cul de sac* between a garage and a cheap, theatrical hotel.

The marshal waited a minute, followed him. Set back in the crevice between the buildings was a narrow, green door. On it was battered lettering:

STAGE-DOOR
JOHNNIES WELCOME

He went inside — a small, smoky room with a dozen tables, a small bar, a row of booths at one side. The walls were covered with framed photographs, and old theater programs. On the mirror behind the bar a trio of crude caricatures had been traced in white soap. Pedley recognized the outlines of a famous tragedian, a radio spieler on a quiz program.

There was no one at the bar except the bartender, a tall, bony man busy with a whiskey bottle and a glass. He filled the glass, set it over to one side, fizzed seltzer in another, nodded briskly to the marshal.

"Rum high," Pedley said. "Jamaica. Little lime." There was no sign of MacNemore. "Where is it?"

The bartender pointed toward a hall behind the last booth. Pedley sauntered over.

He didn't go into the men's room. There was a phone booth just out of sight from the bar. The man inside was MacNemore.

Pedley leaned against the thin paneling.

"Miss Rinn's apartment," MacNemore said into the mouthpiece.

Pedley waited. Nothing happened. After a long minute the box-office man muttered: "No, no message. I'll call back later."

The marshal was back at the bar by the time the door of the booth opened. MacNemore marched to the bar, seized the whiskey, had it halfway to his lips before he recognized the marshal.

"Well, I'll be—Did you follow me?"

Pedley sipped at his drink. "Yair. Thought there might be something you'd forgotten to tell me."

"I might have," MacNemore addmitted. "I'm surprised I can even remember my own name after what's happened. But there wasn't anything I could have told you, anyway."

"Thought you might have recalled where Snymin'd gone."

"Uh, uh." The box-office man drained his glass, slid it across to the bartender. "Put a head on that, Johnnie. You stick that suitcase away where the mice won't get it?"

"Locked it up in the closet, Hobe." The bartender smiled wryly. "But there won't be room enough in there for all the tickets Morris'll have to refund on, now. Some of them scalpers been cleaning up a hundred bucks a week in putting out those *At Ease* pasteboards six to eight weeks ahead."

"Don't worry. Morris'll make good on them." MacNemore eyed Pedley morosely. "I thought maybe he'd gone up to Patsy's place. But I just gave a buzz. Nobody home."

The marshal tried his rum. "Where'd she live?"

"Barclay Hotel." A fat tiger cat slunk around the corner of the bar, rubbed her whiskers against MacNemore's leg. "I don't know if Morris had a key or not. I'll call again in a minute." He bent down, tickled the cat's ear.

"She likes it here, Hobe," Johnnie said. "We must have a better brand of mice." He dropped a fresh scoopful of ice in the chaser-tumbler. "Say, is there anything to that talk about Morris and—you know?"

"What talk?" Pedley cut in before MacNemore could answer.

Johnnie polished the bar, lifted one eyebrow at the box-office man.

MacNemore scowled. "I can't stop him from sticking his nose in, Johnnie." His tone was bitter. "He's from the Fire Department."

The bartender lifted both eyebrows, pulled down the corners of his mouth. "Maybe I was talking out of turn."

"Be okay," Pedley growled, "long's you *keep* talking."

"It was just some of that stuff you pick up, on my side of the counter." Johnnie found a piece of dried herring in an empty cigar-box, dropped it over the edge of the bar for the cat. "Somebody passes the word that Skid Ballou warns Morris to keep away from Miss Rinn —or else." He reached for Pedley's glass. "Refill — on the house?"

"Yair. When'd this happen?"

Johnnie shrugged. "It only come down the line tonight. It's prob'ly the old bushwah. Two guys make a play for the same dame, right away everybody thinks they're going to go gunning for each other."

MacNemore tightened the knot of his tie, irritably. "I don't know about Skid. But Morris's too smart to go gunning for anybody. What's one frill, more or less, to a producer who could have pretty near his pick of the line?" He swirled the liquor around in the bottom of his glass, disconsolately. "Anyway, they won't be scrapping over her anymore. That's certain."

Johnnie polished the bar vigorously. "It sounded like a lot of Malarky to me. Ballou didn't have any right to stake out a Keep-off-the-Grass sign, did he?"

The box-office man looked up, quickly. "Not unless you're old-fashioned. Skid married her. Years back, I heard."

Pedley fingered the envelope in his side pocket. "Is that right?" It had really been a team then, as Skid had said. *Ballou and Rinn, next to closing* . . . .

"They've been split up for a long time." MacNemore took some blocks of tickets out of his coat pckets, stacked them on the bar. "Wasn't any divorce, according to the dope. But they weren't two-ing it. Or Morris wouldn't have fooled around her. Pile these in with the others, hey, Johnnie?"

The bartender gathered them up. "Worth ten bucks apiece yesterday — anywhere on Broadway. Tomorrow they'll sell for a nickel a thousand— to the junkman. Why you go to all the trouble of saving them?"

"Just so some wisey won't get hold of 'em, claim a refund, Johnnie. I didn't get 'em all, but nobody's going to bother with those I left swimming around on the floor."

Pedley laid a bill on the bar. "Why don't you ring that number again, MacNemore?"

"It's only been three or four minutes. But okay." The box-office man ambled away from the bar, watching Pedley out of the corner of his eye.

"Might shortcut us out of some trouble." The marshal strolled after him, caught up with him at the booth. "S'matter? Forget the number?"

MacNemore fumbled with the phone book. "Had it on my mind a minute ago . . ."

"Which one?"

"The Barclay." The box-office man grumbled. "It's Lexington something—"

"Try the other."

"Huh?"

"Try the number you were buzzing before." Pedley gripped the man's wrist, put leverage on it. "You were calling an apartment house. Not a hotel."

"Leggo my arm, damn it. *You're breaking it!*"

The marshal increased the pressure; jammed MacNemore up against the directory shelf. "I'm not going to fool around with you." He reached around to his hip pocket, brought out a length of nickeled chain with a metal *T* at each end.

"Endicott nine," MacNemore moaned, "two four two six."

"That's better." Pedley kept his grip on the man's forearm, stepped sideways into the booth. He dug a nickel out of his pocket, slipped it in the slot.

"Traffic superintendent," he said to the operator. Then, "This is Fire Marshal Pedley. City, official, seven four eight. Who's your subscriber at Endicott nine two four two six?" He listened a moment. "Thanks a lot." He racked the receiver, let go of MacNemore's arm. "Unlisted phone for Miss Patsy Rinn at the *Valencia Arms,* Twenty-one Hundred Central Park West. Snymin wouldn't be up there, would he? You wouldn't have been trying to tip him off, maybe?"

"Listen." MacNemore's face was greasy with sweat. "I work for Morris. He pays me. Here this thing busts smack in my face. I don't know which way to turn. I have to find out. So I put in a call for my boss. Because I figure nobody else will know where to get him; he always kept that number strictly private. If that makes me a heel, so I'm a heel."

"It might make you an accessory, mister." Pedley propelled him toward the street. The cat stiffened her legs, arched her back, leaned against MacNemore. He tripped over her, cursed thickly. "If it's being an accessory to stick up for your boss when he's in a jam, awright, I plead guilty. But lay off the strongarm . . ."

"Pick your feet up." Pedley shoved him through the door. "I'm in a hurry. And I can't leave you behind. I may need you when I get uptown."

He steered MacNemore toward Broadway. To the north the sky was as lurid as on the nights when the neons were blazing full blast. An occasional sprinkle of sparks funnelled high above the burning theater.

Traffic crawled; the crowd overflowed the sidewalks; new units of red-enameled apparatus roared across from the East Side, sirens shrieking.

Pedley hailed a taxi, gave the Central Park address. "What's this about the show closing?"

MacNemore rubbed his wrist, glowering. "Skid put

over a fast one, that's all. Probably told you he wants to do what he can to help the boys in camp. Yeah. Sounds very hundred percent. But he didn't mention hitting Morris for a two hundred boost in his weekly payoff before he made up his mind to sacrifice all for our soldiers, did he?"

"Hadn't heard about it," said Pedley quietly.

"Or that Skid knew if he and Patsy Rinn went touring the tanks it would throw the rest of the company flat on their backs?"

"No."

"There's a snapper to it, too. Skid knew better'n anyone that if he and Miss Rinn did a shuffle-off now, it would put Morris in a hole. That suits Skid swell—so that's the way it sets up. You can call it patriotism if you want to. For my dough, it stinks."

"The show's been cleaning up, hasn't it?"

"We did a clicko eighteen thou last week."

"Your boss ought to have a little laid away for a wet day?"

"You'd think so." MacNemore stared out at the recruiting stand at Columbus Circle. "If you didn't know how costive it is to sugar a dame with a taste for stray hunks of jewelry."

"She put the bite on Snymin?" asked the marshal.

"Look, chum. I probably shot off my face too much to date. That's because Morris wasn't around to do his own talking. Why don't you wait and ask Morris what you want to know. If he's up here."

"You keep right on rolling along, fella. I'm like these poll gatherers. I like to get a consensus." Pedley poked an elbow into his companion's ribs. "Was Miss Rinn being enough of a drain on the bankroll to make your boss think about a way of cutting down expenses, sudden?"

MacNemore merely grunted unintelligibly; said n o t h i n g more until they reached the towering white swankness of the *Valencia Arms.*

Pedley led the box-office man straight to the elevator. The switchboard boy wanted to announce them *via* the apartment phone, but Pedley showed his badge, growled "Up." A f t e r the car was in motion, he added: "Miss Rinn's apartment."

The elevator climbed up to the twelfth floor. "Twelve *E*, sir. I don't believe she's in."

"No." Pedley c a u g h t the flunky's arm. "She's not. And you're not out. Not where you could zip down and use that switchboard. Just drag along with us. And keep your mouth shut."

At the door of Twelve *E* he pushed the buzzer button, prodded MacNemore. "Speak your piece."

"Hell! You want me to stooge for you?"

"Just sing out that you want to see him, urgent. That's all."

Nobody answered the buzzer. Pedley held out his hand to the elevator boy. "Pass-key."

"It's — it's d o w n at the board."

"Don't hand me that. You keep it on you. You wouldn't dare to leave it at the board while you roam around. Come on, *make with the key!*"

The flunky dug a key-ring out of his inside jacket pocket. "I'll most likely get fired for this."

Pedley didn't answer, slid the key into the lock, got the door open quietly. He motioned MacNemore on ahead, crowded close behind him.

Ten steps down the hall they came to a living-room door. There was a lot of low-slung, w h i t e-corduroy furniture; a couple of polar bear rugs, some paintings of bleached bones on grotesque deserts. At the far end of the room a huge Spanish desk—and at the desk a small, dark, dapper man.

He was cleaning out a drawer of the desk, stuffing little packets of letters into a fat brief-case. He spun around in fright.

"What the hell is the idea, Hobe!"

"I can't help myself, Morris," MacNemore spread his palms, nodded toward the marshal.

Pedley went over to the desk. "I'll bounce it right back at you, Snymin. What the hell is the idea of cleaning out the desk in Miss Rinn's apartment?"

The threatical producer snapped: "It's *my* apartment. It's been in her name. But I pay for it. I signed the lease. I own the furniture. I have a right to do what I please, here. Especially since Miss Rinn isn't coming here anymore."

"You're right about that." Pedley took hold of the brief-case. "That's what I want to see you about."

Snymin screwed up his features in a pucker of bewilderment. He then stared hard at Hobe MacNemore. "Who is this guy, Hobe?"

"Marshal. From the Fire Department." MacNemore grimaced. "You didn't know—the theater's burning—"

The p r o d u c e r spat out a curse. "So that's the way they worked it! Weren't satisfied to put the show on the rocks!" He laughed harshly. "W h a t the hell's the difference? The costumes and scenery'd only cost good cash to store, anyhow."

The marshal took one of the letters out of its envelope. "You are too cagey not to have a policy c o v e r i n g your show property. What protection have you got against a charge of murder?"

Snymin opened his mouth, but no sound came out. It was MacNemore who blurted:

"Patsy was killed!"

"Murdered," the m a r s h a l corrected. The letter was an old one; dated three years back. It was postmarked Chicago and

addressed to Miss Patsy Rinn, at the *Valencia Arms.* It began: *"Dearest Pats:"* and was signed, *"Yours for top billing, Your pal, Skiddo."* He glanced up at the producer; the man's face was gray. Furrows lined the swarthy forehead. S t i l l Snymin didn't speak.

Pedley took the torn pair of rompers from his pocket, held them out on two fingers. "Miss Rinn was c h o k e d to death. With these. By the same rat who gnawed a hole in your wardrobe room wall, poured in a gallon of benzine, set fire to it."

"Damn your guts!" The producer's voice was taut with anger. "Don't try to pin a crime like that on me. I may have done a few things I'm ashamed of, but I've never injured anyone in my life." He held out his hand toward M a c N e m o r e. "You know I wouldn't have done a scummy trick like that, Hobe."

"I told him, Morris. I told him you *couldn't* have done it, anyway." He bobbed his head, added hastily: "You came right up here when you left the box-office, didn't you?"

"Certainly I did." Snymin's lips slitted. "I didn't go backstage at all."

"What time'd you get up here from the theater?" the marshal asked.

"About quarter to ten. You can ask the boy in the lobby."

Before Pedley could turn to see if the flunky was still in the hall, a quiet voice said: "Skip the alibi, Morris."

Skid Ballou lounged in the doorway to the corridor. There was a heavy-calibre automatic in his fist; the muzzle swung back and forth in a brief arc covering the three men. "You could get yourself an alibi, the way you've gotten most things you wanted. By paying for it."

Pedley took a deliberate step toward the comedian. "Cut out the vendetta business, S k i d. This is up to the law. It's out of your hands."

The v a c a n t smile drifted across Skid's face; he tilted the muzzle of the gun upward a little, held it out with elbow crooked, his finger t e n s e d. *"This* is in my hands, though. It's as good as a warrant, any day." His face hardened beneath the makeup; his e y e s were cold. "I don't want to press the button on you, mister. But I will, so help me, if you don't go over there against the wall. *Now!"*

Pedley backed away.

"That's the idea. Clasp your hands back of your neck. So you won't get any notions about pulling a gun."

The marshal did as he was told.

"Over beside him, H o b e," Skid said.

MacNemore obeyed with alacrity. The grotesquely savage figure of the comic slouched toward S n y m i n. "The dick wants to crack your alibi, Morris. Maybe you'll give out with

the truth in a minute. Lie down on the floor."

"Please, Skid!"

"Lie down! Face down!" Skid jabbed the gun at Snymin's belt-buckle.

Pedley gritted: "There's ten thousand cops looking for you now, Skid. If you try to settle this thing on your own, what do you think your chances'll be to get away?"

The comedian made his lips smile. "One thing at a time. I'll take care of that after I've taken care of Morris. *Down on the floor, you!*"

Snymin dropped to his knees, pleading: "What good's it going to do her, to shoot me!"

"I'm not going to shoot you. Unless you make me. I got a better way. The gent over there wants a confession. This'll get it for him." He reached around to his hip-pocket, drew out a twelve-ounce bottle filled with colorless fluid.

Pedley guessed what is was, before he saw the label: *spots-zoff*. He inched along the wall, away from the comedian's line of vision, tensed himself. But Skid caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, waggled the automatic in warning.

Snymin snarled: "What the hell are you going to do, Skid! Aren't you satisfied with taking my girl away and ruining me! Why do you have to—"

"Lie down!" Skid hit him across the side of the head with the pistol barrel. The producer fell down on his face, clasping his hands to his head. "Talk to me about taking Pats away from you! After what you did!" The comic held the bottle to his mouth, gripped the cork with his teeth, pulled it out. "It wasn't as if you'd ever really given a damn about her. You just wanted to have her around so you could show her off as a luxury you could afford. You gave her plenty of things, sure." He tipped the bottle up, drenched the prone figure with its contents. "But you never gave her what she wanted. She wanted you to marry her—you wouldn't." He tossed the empty bottle in a chair.

Pedley moved his right hand so that it rested on the front of his right shoulder.

"How could I marry her?" Snymin shrieked. "You would not give her a divorce!" He rolled over on his side, cringing away from the silver lighter that Ballou took from his vest.

"She could have had a divorce any time she wanted it. Any time *you* wanted it." The lighter clicked, a thin cone of yellow wavered as Ballou dropped to one knee. "You didn't want her bad enough for that. You just wanted to keep her to play with, to pet—like Hobe pets that cat of his. And when you found out she wasn't going to be satisfied with that, you told her you'd fix it so she'd never come back to me, no matter what else happened." Skid glanced at the marshal. Pedley's hand froze on his lapel;

he couldn't tell whether the position of his fingers had been noticed.

"*I didn't kill her, Skid!*" The producer rolled over on his back, doubled his knees up, held out his hands to ward away the lighter. "All I meant was I'd keep her in the show and let you go!"

"Then you found out she was going to quit, too. And go on the one-night circuit with me." Ballou bent over; the flame came within a foot of Snymin's drenched coat. "So you decided to get hunk with her by murdering her. Hoping everybody would think she'd burned to death in the fire you started in your own house. Or maybe planning to frame me for the job. Now you're going to see how it f e e l s, yourself." He lunged forward.

Snymin rolled away, screeching, kicking. "D o n ' t! Skid! Gimme a chance—"

Pedley barked: "*Skid!*" He got his fingers on the butt of his service special.

The comedian didn't pause.

The marshal snapped: "You wouldn't want to make the wrong guy pay for—what happened—would you?"

Ballou growled like an animal, deep in his throat. "I have not got the wrong guy. You'll hear him admit it, in a second or so."

"Yes, yes, yes!" S n y m i n p a n t e d. His e y e s bulged with horror at the luminous spire of the flame. "I'll admit anything you want. Only keep that away from me."

Skid grinned wolfishly, pivoted around as Pedley stepped away from the wall.

"Man'll say any d a m n e d thing to save his life," the marshal jerked his gun free. "But you're going to p u n i s h the wrong man if you aren't careful with that lighter. Ask MacNemore if I'm not right!"

"Me?" MacNemore let his hands fall at his side, helplessly. "Don't ask me. All I know is Patsy was bleeding Morris for every lousy nickel she could get out of him."

Pedley snapped: "Put out the lighter, Skid.

Mechanically, the comedian thumbed over the silver lid. The flame disappeared. Snymin began to hiccough, hysterically, snaked along the floor on his stomach.

MacNemore went on: "But a thing like this, Morris. I couldn't believe it of you!"

Skid came to his feet; he kept his eyes on the box-office man but spoke to Pedley in the deadpan monotone: "W h a t ' s the scenario, dick?"

"The cat." Pedley shifted his pistol so it covered MacNemore. "A minute ago you mentioned his pet cat. When I was in the box-office I stumbled over a cat's sandbox and feed-pan."

MacNemore looked puzzled. "Everybody knows I have a cat. So what?"

"The cat wasn't in the thea-

ter when the fire started." The marshal stalked to the box-office man, frisked him swiftly. "You'd taken him over to Stage-Door Johnnie's. So the animal would be out of danger. You didn't mind strangling a girl or risking the lives of the people in the theater—*but you didn't want your cat roasted alive.*"

The box-office man frowned and sniggered at the same time. "What kind of an act are you putting on? I promised to give Johnnie the cat a week ago."

"Yair? Maybe you doped out your scheme a week ago, too. To cover up a steal from Snymin, maybe."

The producer staggered erect, propped himself against a chair. "The books—are all right," he hiccoughed.

"To date, maybe." Pedley watched fear creep into MacNemore's eyes. "How about a checkup on advance sales?"

The box-office man appealed to Snymin. "Tell the guy he's cuckoo, Morris. There isn't a penny unaccounted for—"

"You wouldn't have to account for advance tickets," the marshal said. "The books wouldn't have to balance until the stubs were taken in at the door. You could fix that all right. Also, you could pick yourself off a few thousand by letting those scalpers Johnnie mentioned have a couple of hundred tickets a week. Eight weeks ahead—at four-forty a throw—it would amount to important coin."

Sweat crystallized on MacNemore's eyebrows. "The first time in my life anybody accuses me of touching a dime that don't belong to me. Let alone this other business of murder and arson. How could I expect to get away with a thing like that?"

"Maybe you planned to 'borrow' the dough you got from the speculators." Pedley fished in his pockets, found nothing but a wallet with a few bills, some cards, a little change. "Lots of embezzlers start that way— and wind up the hard way because something unexpected caught up with them. Like the notice of the show's closing put an end to your racket, probably. Only way out for you was something that would destroy the records in the box-office—spoil a lot of advance tickets so nobody could tell how many'd been sold. When the scalpers would show up for their refunds—Snymin would have to shell out without any way of telling whether he'd ever taken in the dough for them in the first place. If the fire didn't bankrupt him, that is."

"Why would I double-cross Morris?" MacNemore begged.

"We'll find out." The marshal stuck the wallet in his own pocket. "You said something about expensive dames, maybe you've been buying gadgets for one, yourself."

"All this phonus-balonus," the box-office man whimpered, "because I gave Johnnie my cat to chase the mice out of his barroom! You're screwier than—"

"There's more than that." Pedley took the old envelope out of his pocket. "Guy who did the job chipped plaster away from the wall in the wardrobe-room, knowing the theater well enough to figure the benzine would follow the old gas-pipes down through the wall to the box-office. You'd know that, having been house-man there, you'd be able to lock the box-office for a few minutes and sneak out backstage during the finale—get upstairs to the dressing-room floor. I don't suppose you figured on Patsy's coming up so soon and hearing you—or maybe she just wanted something for her costume."

"I haven't been backstage for a week," MacNemore wept.

Pedley rattled the plaster in the envelope. "Maybe you did not know plaster's like finger-prints. The sand this was mixed with shows so many black grains per hundred, so many grains of red sandstone, so many pure quartz—" He stopped, suddenly, pulled up one cuff of MacNemore's trousers. "Good thing you're wearing a pre-war suit—" he picked white grains from the inside of the pant-cuff—"or we might not be able to check these. . ."

Something hurtled past Pedley's shoulder. It was Skid, clubbing his gun, smashing viciously at MacNemore's skull. The box-office man squeaked in terror, sank to the floor. The marshal grabbed Ballou's shoulder; wrenched him around, hooked a hard left to the comedian's jaw. Skid's head went back. Pedley hit him again, with more beef behind it.

The star of *At Ease* stumbled against a coffee table; stood swaying, dazed. His automatic bounded on the carpet. Snymin dived for it, but MacNemore was nearer. He scrambled toward it in a frenzy of fear, clutched it as the producer clawed at him. There was a muffled *cah,* a grunt of pain from Snymin—and a sheet of bluish incandescence that made a flaming halo around the producer's head and shoulders.

He screamed once as MacNemore tumbled back, gasping at the result of his shot. Pedley took a short step, put his weight into a kick that caught MacNemore flush on the point of the jaw. The murderer collapsed.

The marshal snatched one of the bear rugs, threw it on Snymin, grabbed him, rolled him over and over. He ripped the man's coat off him, stamped out the flames; beat out the blazing shirt collar with his bare hands. Then he picked up the automatic, dropped it in his pocket.

"Skid," he said. "The phone. An ambulance. Jump."

The comedian reeled unsteadily toward the hall. "How's for

calling the wagon—for that?" He stared incredulously at MacNemore.

"Ambulance first. Then the bathroom. Might be some burn ointment—medicine chest."

MacNemore lay with his head twisted around on one shoulder, jammed up against the wall. Blood trickled down over his chin. He opened his eyes, squirmed around, got a hand up, felt of his jaw. "There wasn't any—plaster in my cuff," he mumbled. "I didn't stand — near the wall." He closed his eyes. "There was — a trunk there—in the way. I left — the screwdriver — on it. You tricky—"

"Yair." Pedley scowled at Snymin's singed head. "You're a straight-shooter, yourself!"

"You didn't—compare that—plaster, either . . . You didn't —have time."

"Time enough later," Pedley said. "Plenty of it." He licked a blister on his hand. "Time to burn, guy."

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time enough

by Charlotte and Dan Ross

Of course she should have realized he was the killer from the beginning. Miss Thorndike peered out from the alcove office of her basement lending library. As usual the surly man stood just inside the door waiting, and every so often glaring at the nearest shelf of books. Her pale eyes blinked nervously as she remembered all the signs and yet it had never occurred to her. Well, now she must inform the police.

It was the quiet time of the afternoon and she was quite alone with the squat man in the shadowy shop. Moving awkwardly past the rows of ceiling-high bookshelves she pretended to busy herself arranging a display of hooked rugs on the opposite wall. Her thin face was pale and strained and she felt the full weight of her seventy-odd years. Just how was she to manage it w i t h o u t warning him? The phone was on the table within his easy hearing.

Six months ago the squat man and his wife had first come to her shop. The wife, a pleasant middle-aged person, was an avid reader. He had always stood in the background silent

Charlotte and Dan Ross, who will be remembered for their sensitive THE THREE THIEVES (SMM, February 1962) turn to these days in this vignette of a man whose strange behavior may of course have a very simple explanation — but you wonder . . .

and staring. There was an oddness about his wide, flat face and deep-set black eyes that had struck her from the beginning. That and a certain something about the way he walked. And his clothing—a faded brown suit and cheap cotton cap.

Then he'd started his daily visits alone, staying just a half-hour or so and leaving as abruptly as he'd arrived. Miss Thorndike, who prided herself for her tactfulness, had made it a point not to mention them to his wife until the afternoon of the scene.

Old Mrs. Bagnell, one of her best customers, had chosen this book "BY LOVE BETRAYED." It was rather a poor novel but the only new one available. Miss Thorndike felt she'd made a mistake in adding the book to her library. She'd rented it just a few times. Including once to the surly man's wife.

As old Mrs. Bagnell brought the novel over to stamp and sign the library card the surly man had bounced forward, his eyes bright with madness, and pounded her desk. "Anyone who would read that should be killed!" he cried in an angry voice. Then he'd turned and rushed out.

Miss Thorndike had been thoroughly upset and mentioned it to his wife when she came by the next day.

The pleasant woman had frowned. "I'm sorry he comes here," she said. "He takes these fits of rage since his breakdown. But he'll get tired of coming I'm sure. These obsessions don't last. And I assure you he's quite harmless."

Miss Thorndike had managed a thin smile. "I'm afraid it was rather disconcerting to my customer, Miss Bagnell."

"I'll speak to him about it," the woman told her, "and if there's anything of the sort happens again be sure and tell me. I don't want him to annoy you any more."

It was on the point of Miss Thorndike's tongue to say that he was already causing her a great deal of annoyance. But the woman was a customer and there was this hope that the husband would tire of his game and go somewhere else. So she said nothing.

When a month later Miss Bagnell was found strangled behind a clump of bushes in the park, it never occurred to her that the surly man might have been the killer. The police were quite certain the motive had been theft. The old woman, against all advice, had been carrying a large sum of cash in her purse and it had been taken.

Miss Thorndike remembered the scene and found herself especially nervous whenever the squat man came in now. But his wife was such a nice

person and so unconcerned about his peculiar behaviour that she also came to accept it as not too strange.

* * *

Then there had been her own personal tragedy. Two months ago when her invalid niece had taken an overdose of sleeping tablets and died. The police had quietly accepted the view of accidental death and so saved their fine family name from any touch of scandal. But Susan's death had shocked and saddened her. It was not reasonable she should have made this mistake after using the tablets so long.

Miss Thorndike tortured herself with questioning if there could have been any trouble between her niece and her husband. The young man had seemed quite broken up at her death. But Susan having been an invalid so long, she wondered if perhaps another woman had come into the picture and her niece had found out.

So it was not until the second murder that she began to think the surly man could be a killer. The second victim had been Mr. Dawson, a retired bank manager, who was also a regular library customer.

The surly man came in for a while every day and she tried to rack her memory if he had been there when Mr. Dawson had taken out the book "BY LOVE BETRAYED." And she was certain he had been. It was the first time the book had been out since the other episode with poor Mrs. Bagnell.

And now a week later Mr. Dawson was dead. Found strangled in a dark alley near his home. Miss Thorndike glanced nervously at the surly man's powerful hands and began to tremble uncontrollably. It had to be! Even the police had been unable to find a reasonable motive for this murder. But she knew one. And she pictured the red jacket of "BY LOVE BETRAYED" which Mr. Dawson had returned before his murder and which now sat in its place on the shelf again. A mad reason for murder, but why shouldn't it be? The surly man was definitely a lunatic.

As she finished with the rugs and started back to her desk the front door opened and Mrs. Downey came in. She was a stout, unprepossessing woman with a sly manner and an addiction to gossip. Mrs. Thorndike didn't like her at all. But even she could prove a welcome ally just now.

Miss Thorndike gestured for the stout woman to join her in the small alcove where they'd have a bit of privacy. And Mrs. Downey waddled past the surly man with a simpering smile.

Taking her by the arm Miss Thorndike spoke tensely in a low voice: "I have something

dreadful to tell you."

The fat woman stared at her in surprise.

Miss Thorndike licked her lips nervously, and after an apprehensive look at the surly man still standing outside, confided: "I know something the police don't guess!"

And now it was Mrs. Downey's turn to surprise her. A look of understanding came into the bovine heavily-powdered face. "How did you find out?"

"I realized just now," Miss Thorndike whispered, trying to imagine how Mrs. Downey had caught on so soon, "before you came in."

"I wanted to spare you," Mrs. Downey's face assumed a look of mock sympathy. "It's over with and what does it matter. Accident or suicide!"

It was as though all the breath had s u d d e n l y been drawn out of her. The thin face of the librarian was blank with amazement. "What do you mean, accident or suicide?" she asked sharply.

"Your niece's death! You said you knew just now that Susan had killed herself. I could have told you long ago. You see I was the one!" The fat woman's pop eyes were lighted with what seemed to be pride.

"You were the one?" The words came slowly from the stupefied old woman.

"Yes. I found out about her husband and that Parker girl. I felt it was my duty to tell her." Mrs. Downey gave her bosom a self-righteous heave.

There was a long pause. Miss Thorndike placed her hand at her side as if it pained. Then she looked into the fat woman's stupid face. "You did that! You told her a thing like that! Knowing how ill she was! You might as well have killed her outright." Her voice raised and there was a rasping sob in it.

Mrs. Downey gave her a warning nudge that the surly man was still outside and might hear. Then lowered her head close to whisper h o a r s e l y: "Susan had a right to know. I'd have wanted anyone to tell me. As for the rest—it's best forgotten!"

Miss Thorndike nodded slowly. "Yes, best forgotten." Her voice weak and shaky.

Airily dismissing the whole sorry business, Mrs. Downey advanced into the library and studied the gay-jacketed books. "I really came by for something to read," she said in a casual tone. "Can you suggest anything?"

So confused were Miss Thorndike's thoughts that she didn't hear the woman at all. Stupid, v i c i o u s, trouble-maker! The words repeated themselves in her mind over and over again.

Mrs. Downey s u d d e n l y pounced on a book. "Now, here's something!" She lifted it from

its place near the end of the shelf. "By Love Betrayed!" She turned to the old librarian with a smug, knowing smile: "Quite suitable, isn't it? I think I'll try this one."

For a brief second Miss Thorndike had the impulse to cry out a warning. Then she remembered a vivid picture. Susan's wan, l i f e l e s s face against her pillow! She looked past Miss Downey at the surly man who was standing there motionless, only his lips working nervously.

She said: "It should do you very well." And making no effort to reply to the stout woman's patter of small talk she placed it in a library jacket and went back to her desk bending over the files to find and stamp the proper card.

The shop door opened and closed twice. When she looked up again both Mrs. Downey and the surly man had gone. She b r u s h e d a thin hand wearily across her forehead. It had been a dreadful day! Dreadful indeed!

What was it she had intended doing? Ah, yes, the police. She must phone the police and tell them about the surly man and her certainty that he was the killer they were looking for.

And now Mrs. Downey had the book! She moved across to the phone and then hesitated. Better not jump to any rash conclusions. Better to wait a few days or a week. After all she couldn't be completely certain about her theory—yet.

ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE POLICE

The recent report of the Royal Commission on the Police has been widely criticised in England, and it has been pointed out that out of the fourteen members of the commission only six found themselves able to sign the report without any reservation or addition. The urgency about the figures for reported crime and for criminals brought to justice does not appear to be reflected in the decisions arrived at by the commission which, for instance, agrees that a national detective force is needed but feels that "the matter should be kept under constant review; and the Government should not hesitate . . . to establish a separate C.I.D. if our present recommendations prove inadequate to meet the needs of the time." In other words, it is proposed to lock the stable door a f t e r the horse has escaped, and to establish a national detective force only if the crime wave gets worse. Similarly (and where is this not true?) it is conceded that the police service is failing to attract men of the desired calibre; some recommendations are made, such as a reduction in the minimum qualifying period for promotion from constable to sergeant, but the increasing need for a more centralized force to cope with the worsening crime situation is recognized only by the minority on the Commission.

the fine line of difference

by . . . Leighla Whipper

"Decorum" had been the watchword in the Scott Ruskin Graduate Library of Social Sciences under the twenty-year regime of Agatha Lipton. Located on upper Fifth Avenue, the Victorian mansion graciously lent itself to use by students of the many colleges in the city of New York.

The scope of the collection was largely due to the now fabled Scott Ruskin himself, who, with remarkable foresight, had begun assembling books in this newer field in the middle of the last century. As expected, he had left his mansion to house his books, with more than adequate funds for staff, new acquisitions, and maintenance.

The fact that the man had been considered one of the leading robber barons of the muckracking period of American history was often the subject of amused speculation by many of the students who now indirectly partook of his bounty. Steel had turned into an endless flow of gold for Mr. Ruskin during that era. But an embarrassing strike by his workers for a decent living wage had given

Leighla Whipper makes a first appearance in this magazine with the present story of a grimly single-minded woman who faces the challenge to her authority with the same efficiency with which she has coped with so many other problems over the years. Miss Whipper, who has taught at Mexico City College, now lives here in the East, in New York State.

him a great deal to think about. More millions added to his now myriad taxless millions were now pointless. He began concentrating upon a new image of himself to present to posterity, and spent his later years devising ways and means of becoming the greatest philanthropist of all time.

So now by mid-twentieth century, sixty years after his death, his library was famed in academic circles throughout the country, reaching its peak of growth and prestige under the guiding hand of Miss Agatha Lipton.

"The tone and decorum of this place," she was saying in her concluding remarks of her monthly staff meeting, "depend upon its personnel."

She paused to let this bear in on the eight people facing her. The atmosphere was tense as it always had been at these meetings, and it was not difficult to see that something in the manner of the Head Librarian was inexorably pressing itself upon the joint will of the staff.

She was a woman of fifty with a face containing a rather severe beauty of bone. The gray hair, cut and waved away from the face matched penetrating gray eyes. Her voice, only a few decibles above a whisper, managed to carry all the authority and purpose of that of a top sergeant.

The assistant librarian, Mrs. Dickinson, flinched as she wondered what faux pas she had now committed. She was certain these words were directed to her. She shifted her feet and bit her lower lip. Surely that novel she had been reading while on duty at the Reference Desk yesterday had not been noted.

Miss Francis was equally certain she was the target. She had been late twice that week, and although she had first hurried to her second floor office without saying good-morning to the staff downstairs, she was certain that Miss Lipton had phoned up there in the catalogue room on the dot of nine to check her promptness.

Mr. List mentally reviewed his week at the circulation desk. Of course, Thursday he *had* peeped into his assignment for the month, *John Stuart Mill, His Life and Times,* and made a few more notes on his three by five cards for his files, but after all, it had been a long strenuous week, and he simply had to refresh himself sometime after dealing so much with such things as *The Slums of Brooklyn,* and *The Statistics on Suicide.* There really was so little here to help him on the rocky road to his Doctorate in English which he was now pursuing on a part-time basis. Surely she wouldn't grudge him a peep into old John Stuart.

Miss Alba's mind clicked with the sure realization that she had been caught again, "staring

into space," as Miss Lipton so often had put it. While relieving Mr. List at the circulation desk, she was supposed to find work for herself there—overdue notices to write, the day's circulation to file and so forth. If she didn't stop day-dreaming, what would happen to her?

The other four were newer additions to the staff, women who were consequently not too sure just what Miss Lipton was *getting* at. It would take another two years for them to gain the insight of the four older members.

"Even this lovely office," Miss Lipton continued, "which used to be Mr. Ruskin's and which I now use, reflects what I am saying. The atmosphere and *tone* is here, just as it is in the entire mansion. It is up to us to see that it is kept."

As a matter of fact, Miss Lipton had no one member of her staff in mind as she spoke for she had been far too preoccupied that week to notice the slight aberrations from duty which would surely have come to her eye in one of her more attentive spans. But it was just on this account that she so spoke. She was sure that she had missed a few lapses, and she felt it wise to show them that her omniscience still prevailed.

"What about Circulation, Mr. List?" she asked suddenly.

Caught unaware, Mr. List cleared his throat hurriedly, choked for an agonizing moment and began. "Still rushed at the peak hours of twelve and one, and later on at five. The students do tend to rush one," he concluded.

"But I mean the figures. Are circulation statistics holding?"

"Oh yes, Miss Lipton. In fact, last week's circulation was the highest yet."

Miss Lipton turned her gaze upon Mrs. Dickinson. There was faint disapproval in her regard, as Mrs. Dickinson had, that same week, asked for and received a free afternoon to see a friend off to Europe. Although this had been granted her by none other than Miss Lipton herself, still there was the vague tone of dereliction from duty which Mrs. Dickinson did not fail to recognize.

"And what are you able to say in general about the Reference Room, Mrs. Dickinson?"

Those innocent words, "are you able" were the key. To the newer staff they meant nothing, but to the regulars, they meant, "after cavorting around on trans-Atlantic liners, tossing off cocktails and in general behaving with frivolous abandon, never once thinking of your duty to the Reference Room of Scott Ruskin Library, what would you now be able to say that could be of any possible help to us in running this key spot of culture in New York."

"We're kept busy as usual—no problems except the constant

ones of students and faculties of various schools wanting to make inter-library loans of reference materials. I try to explain that they do not circulate in my department."

She managed a smile which was not returned by her superior. Without comment Miss Lipton turned to Miss Francis who now felt like a trapped rabbit.

"Miss Francis, are you caught up with your cataloging?"

This was indeed ingenious wording. Often Miss Frances was assigned to other duties which put a heavier burden upon her to keep up to date with her own work, cataloging. She was now a full month behind and felt that somehow, the question at that moment implied that sheer slowness had blocked her progress of processing new acquisitions.

"I'm not too far behind," she answered reasonably. "Of course my mornings are broken up when I come downstairs to relieve Mrs. Dickinson for her coffee ——"

"Ah, but of course," Miss Lipton murmured, "you know that with such a small staff, we are all constrained to fill in and help out wherever necessary. That's to be expected. But you're not caught up yet? We simply have got to get going on these things, Miss Francis. But I see it's almost ten, and time to think of opening our library. If Miss Alba and Mr. List would go down to the cafeteria and bring up some coffee, I think we'll just have time to drink it."

Then something occurred which never failed to mystify the newer staff. A swift change came. Miss Lipton's face relaxed into a smile as she chatted with Miss Francis, Mr. List and Mrs. Dickinson. The latter, a widow, had two teen-age daughters and they heard Miss Lipton inquire of their latest doings with the most sincere cordiality. They also noted that now, the two older women called each other by first names. It could have been a most innocuous tea-party as all sipped from paper cups in an atmosphere of great camaraderie, later heading for their respective posts of duty.

Miss Lipton remained at her desk, and as she watched the last person leave the room, her smile faded, her eyes became troubled and there was the slightest slump in her erect shoulders. She seemed to fight back at some thought with almost physical effort. What would she do? It was something that had almost sent her into a state of shock. Only her severe discipline had helped her conduct the meeting this morning. The Board had had a meeting at the beginning of the week, and she had heard through her usual dependable channels that the question had come up which

she, for years had found it impossible to face. Indeed, she had with notable success pretended it would never arise. But there it was, as inevitable as—well as death itself, she supposed. The board had—had—the board had spoken of her retirement.

With crisp efficiency, Mr. List stamped students' books with "date due" after asking to see their bursar's receipt from their respective colleges. This was used at the Scott Ruskin instead of a library card. Even though by now he well knew many of them, still came the insistent demand each time they came to the desk as his eyes glinted whimsically through his steeel-rimmed glasses. "And your bursar's receipt, please?"

Miss Alba came behind the desk with him. "I'm going up to the Catalog Room," she said sotto voice, "but I'll be down to relieve you at lunch. If you need me before then, telephone me."

They spoke after the manner of most library staff, ignoring the existence of the borrower unless some question was asked—and usually, that could be answered with one of ten answers which came so readily to the tongue that it took no thinking.

"Something's in the air," Mr. List said, never stopping his work. "I can feel it. Would you mind showing me your bursar's receipt, please, yes, every time. Of course the whole trouble is that this library has been her entire life for twenty years. If only she'd—yes, for seven days only—that's a seven day book—if only she'd get interested in stamps or music."

"That's impossible," Miss Alba replied. "Her hobby is taking work home with her. She sits hours at night writing out stuff for her secretary to work on during the day . . . what? Yes, we're open until six every night."

"I know for a fact that she has eaten her lunch every day this week at her desk," Mr. List affirmed as he added more ink to his stamp pad.

"It's more than human nature can bear. Imagine spending one's entire vacation clipping articles for our bulletin boards and attending library conventions. She just drives herself too much."

"Quite true . . . bursar's receipt please *(you'd think they'd know by now wouldn't you?)* That's what makes her so edgy, and especially to Mrs. Dickinson. I do feel sorry for her."

"Well, I've got to run. I don't want to be caught here at this desk when I'm supposed to be upstairs. She just might pass by this room."

A week later the blow fell. What was once the strong rumor was now the unbearable insupportable fact. Agatha Lipton paled as she sat in the

meeting which seemed to have been specially called. There were laudatory introductory remarks such as her unmatched contribution over the twenty-year period. She barely heard the phrases—"growth and development of the collection—unprecedented efficiency with which the library had been run during her tenure." She tightened her lips in silence as she listened to the generous terms of her retirement stipend. Not one of her predecessors had been so favored. Then she grew attentive as the words—"unwritten understanding that twenty-year retirement was automatic." This is what she had hoped the board would waive in her case. They had not done so. She tensed in suppressed anger as the fool yammered about not wanting to impair her health.

Her health indeed! Couldn't they see the library *was* her health? Her life? After the year was out there would be a testimonial dinner, an expensive gift, champagne, speeches, an article in the *Times*, and she would be out to pasture—and in her place—*in her place* . . .

She closed her eyes in pain at the thought of Hilda Dickinson sitting in her office—hers and Mr. Ruskin's.

"And how can we adequately thank you? There isn't any possible way," the Chairman concluded. "I know this is a difficult moment, and although you, of course knew it had to come, still I'm quite sure ——"

Why didn't the idiot shut up and mercifully release her from this torture. She wanted to go down to her office to think—to realize what was happening. Hilda Dickinson her successor! Why Hilda was the sloppiest worker on the staff. Only sentiment on the part of the misguided Board, and the strange fact that everyone liked Hilda had kept her her job throughout the years. Otherwise she could have fired her years ago. Her two daughters and a full social life engaged her—what on earth did she care about the Scott Ruskin!

It was over at last. After the proprieties of taking leave had been observed she was allowed to return to her office. Closing time came with maddening slowness. Usually for her it galloped along and it was six before she knew it. But now the early New York dusk was deceptive. It was only five. She looked around her office. It was a quiet place with the clatter of the secretary's typewriter silenced. She had let the girl go home early. The Victorian elegance of the oak paneled walls, Mr. Ruskin's own desk at which she worked—the garden directly outside the south window, the remote hum of traffic from the ones on the west—what would she do without it all? She glanced around, musing a moment on the painting of Mr. Ruskin which hung

over the mantel. His eyes seemed to speak to her.

One by one the staff said goodbye at the door. This custom had been established early in her tenure. A quick word—the taking of leave—in effect, her permission to go home. As Mrs. Dickinson came late, as usual, she called her in.

"I suppose a celebration is in order for both of us, Hilda," she said as she took a bottle of sherry from her coat closet. "This sherry was left from our last Christmas party."

"Celebration?" Mrs. Dickinson paused, a homey picture in her flat-heeled work shoes which she had forgotten to change. Her coat was over her arm, her streaked gray hair in slight disarray.

"You don't pretend not to know what has happened," Miss Lipton poured two glasses to the brim. Hilda could never resist this sort of frivolous drinking. How fitting it all was, and to think that it was Mr. Ruskin who had given her the idea.

"I'm retiring at the end of the year. You're set for the job."

Mrs. Dickinson's emotions were considerably mixed. A discreet and appropriate answer was necessary. She raised her glass.

"To the Scott Ruskin Library," she said.

"To the Scott Ruskin Library," Miss Lipton replied. Her eyes were shining as she drank.

"I always did like a lift at the end of the day," Mrs. Dickinson said. "But this whole thing is rather a shock—a bit unsettling."

"Of course this is all *sub rosa,* but I felt you ought to know. And the funniest thing happened. On the very day I was told I had to leave, I discovered something I'm sure nobody knows exists—look here."

Mrs. Dickinson followed her superior. "A secret panel, I suspect. I always wondered if Mr. Ruskin had a secret safe built in his office. There were two upstairs for Mrs. Ruskin's jewels."

"Exactly. Watch!"

Mrs. Dickinson felt no sense of danger as she watched her tomb open. What was going through her mind was the prosaic thought that she had forgotten to call Diana, her daughter, to tell her to take three TV dinners from the freezer. The blow from behind stunned her instantly.

Exaltation filled Miss Lipton. She and she alone had saved the Scott Ruskin Library from an entirely inadequate successor. Now let them scour the country for the best person to replace her. As the oak panel slid into place, closing out the walk-in safe made of the best Ruskin steel, she noted how perfectly it matched its mates,

revealing nothing of secret within. She finished her sherry and looked for approval from Mr. Ruskin's picture.

"And so appropriate," she smiled up at him. "It's Amontillado!"

But enough of that. She heard the maintenance men cleaning the building. They would know better than to disturb her if the light was on in her office. She had lots of work to finish up. She might even spend the night there on the leather couch. . . .

AN EDITORIAL ASIDE

The June 18th, 1962, decision in the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit (in Chicago) that publishing true crime stories for profit long after the facts had been reported represented an illegal invasion of privacy, has caused understandable concern in publishing circles. The decision had referred to two stories, published in 1958, about the assault upon and murder of a high school girl in Chicago during 1957. The publishers had argued that the story was "newsworthy, of great public interest, and designed to inform and educate its readers" but the Court had ruled that "the articles in question, published months after the death . . . had ceased to be news and for that reason these articles were not published in news media, but in magazines sold for the entertainment of their readers."

In the appeals court decision Judge Elmer J. Schnackenberg spoke for Judges Knoch and Swygert in saying: "By our holding we in no way suppress the legitimate publication of news; rather we condemn the pursuit, for commercial purposes, of those who were connected with the events at the time they were newsworthy. When the news media have served their proper function in reporting current events, private individuals involved therein sink back into the solitude which is the right of every person. That solitude involves a privacy which no publication has the right to thereafter invade solely for the purpose of selling lurid accounts of tragedy to its readers."

A number of newspaper, magazine and book publishers have expressed understandable concern about the broad wording of the decision which it is felt could lead to incursions on the "freedom of the press" amendment in the Bill of Rights. It is anticipated that the originally affected publishers, if unsuccessful in their petition for a rehearing by the same court of appeals, will take the case to the U. S. Supreme Court, requesting a review of the lower court's decision. At this time there will no doubt be expressions of interest on the part of others who cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as concerned "solely" with "selling lurid accounts of tragedy to its readers," but who from time to time do publish articles or books which, while **not** "lurid," do deal with matters which have previously appeared in the public prints. A clarification of the appeals court decision is obviously desirable.

H.S.S.

death in mexico

by . . . Henry Dempsey

Gil really didn't begin to enjoy their trip until the day he decided to kill his wife. After that there was a new bounce to his step and a new glint in his eye: he looked 10 years younger. His cheering thoughts of death were restoring his interest in life.

Anyone who knew Gil's wife Pammy would s u r e l y understand how he could feel this way, and would know from what dark and subterranean well Gil's black thoughts had been pumped. But knowing the reasons for a murder doesn't justify it, for if it did lawlessness would surely stalk the land. Gil was well aware of this, so he carefully kept his plans to himself while they matured and ripened slowly. Being a meticulous, organized man in everything that he did, he did not hurry. Murder is the kind of thing that you did once—and did well—or not all. There must not be the slightest chance that the plan could go wrong. It had to be foolproof, since Pammy, very much of a fool, was involved. The whole thing had to be done artfully and with great care. That was the beauty of the plan. It was going to be murder — only Gil

There are ways of disposing of unwanted wives which demand an attention to details which must not be ignored. Artistry is not enough — the simple will to act is not enough — it is advisable to also anticipate every thought and act and impulse of your victim . . .

wasn't going to kill her. He was just going to arrange things so perfectly that Pammy would commit suicide at a time when she was completely alone.

As they sat on the terrace of the Camarones Club, sipping chill afternoon daiquiris, he let the senseless babble of her voice wash over him. He didn't really listen, just dipped his attention in every once in awhile to see if she needed an answer. As usual, none was necessary. Long habit shaped an attentive, meaningless half-smile on his lips. From a distance they appeared to be another typical American couple, rich fugitives from the chill rains of Manhattan. A little closer and the picture wasn't as perfect: her voice was too shrill and empty, his attention too false. Upon closer acquaintance it was very obvious that she was stupid and bored. If you guessed then that she was the empty-headed heiress to a large fortune and he a shrewd and calculating fortune-hunter who had married her for it, you would be absolutely right.

Hooking Pammy had been a lot easier than Gil had thought it would be. Living with her was proving to be the hard part. After two years he was getting so tired of the sound of her voice that he had even considered leaving her. But he was too used to living well now, and the thought of losing all those millions was a painful one. She was too stupid to give him any grounds for a divorce that would enable him to get even a small part of the fortune. Only if she died would he inherit his rightful share.

Once this idea had been planted it grew in fertile soil. Pammy was in good health, and even though she was getting soft about the middle, she still had plenty of years to go. Probably outlast him. If she was going to die soon enough to be of any profit at all to him he would have to arrange the demise himself. It is a tribute to Gil's avarice, selfishness and egotism that he never for an instant felt a twinge of emotion over the thought of her death.

While she talked on he smiled and ran through the plans once more in his mind. They were faultless. In the morning they would leave Cuernavaca, beginning the long drive back to the States. When they passed through the arid desert north of Mexico City the operation would begin.

The next night, after a long drive, they stopped in an air conditioned motel. As soon as her nightly sleeping pill had had its effect he went out. It promised to be even hotter in the morning and he smiled into the darkness; the air was still torrid and the metal of the car hot to the touch. Gil checked carefully to make sure everything was in its place, then went back to the room. He fell

asleep instantly, a man very pleased with himself.

"You're so quiet," Pammy said next morning as the big car hurtled down the arrow-straight highway. Gil sat tensely behind the wheel, peering out at the sun drenched desert through large sunglasses. The air conditioner hummed, but in spite of the cool air in the car his face was beaded with fine drops of sweat.

"Tired," he mumbled, "didn't sleep well last night." Which was not true, but apparently satisfied Pammy. She slumped deeper into the soft seat and lit a cigarette, one toe keeping time to the blaring m u s i c from the radio. He was barely aware of her as he divided his attention between the slowly turning numbers on the odometer and the burnt desert outside. When 593 came up he eased off on the gas and kept a careful eye on the right-hand shoulder of the road. In spite of this he was by the rough track before he noticed it. He took a careful, slow breath and his plan began.

"Say! Look at that temperature!" he said l o u d l y. "The radiator is going to boil over in a minute." He braked the car to a smooth stop on the shoulder and waited for the cloud of white dust to settle. The road was g l a r i n g and empty in both directions, and as long as it stayed that way the plan would go through.

"I'm going to put some more water in," he said, killing the engine and opening the door.

"Well be quick about it," Pammy said petulantly. "It's getting hot already. Close that door."

After the comfort of the car the air was an oven, and Gil smiled up at the burning disk of the sun. The hotter the better. He quickly unlocked the trunk and pulled out the jerry-can, carrying it around to the other side he knocked on Pammy's window. When she cranked it open he took the top off the can and held it u p s i d e down.

"E m p t y," he said. "That stupid mechanic didn't fill it after I told him to."

"Well, for God's sake, go find some before I cook," she said, closing the window.

Out of sight behind the large lid of the open trunk, he allowed himself a grim smile. It was working perfectly. With his teeth he tore open the corner of the plastic bag and let the two quarts of water gush into the jerrycan. He let the empty bag fall into the dust before he slammed the trunk shut. It had taken only a few seconds and she had noticed nothing.

The car was hot, but as soon as he turned the engine on the temperature began to drop. He made a pretense of looking at th well-memorized map, pointing to the road they had just passed.

"There's a side road, just here," he said, "with a town just a little way along it. I think we better go there. There's no water for 50 miles ahead, and we would boil over long before we reached it."

Pammy barely nodded agreement, since she was busy repairing her sodden make-up. As he pulled the car around in a tight U-turn, Gil couldn't help feeling contemptuous. Anyone this ignorant deserved to die. Someone who couldn't tell if an engine thermometer was hot or cold, or who didn't see that the map on the seat was a detailed geodetic survey far different from the cheap throw-away road maps he always used, someone who was this impervious to the facts of the world deserved very much to leave it. With a hard pull on the wheel he turned into the dirt road.

It was no more than a track scratched through the sand and cactus, twisting and rough. Pammy started complaining from the instant they entered it and never shut up. At first he argued with her, then he said nothing. But all the time he kept driving and when he finally stopped they were miles from the highway.

"It looks like you were right," he said mildly, "there's no town here. I must have taken the wrong road. We better go back."

He turned the big car around with much effort and started back down the track. She never noticed when he turned into another track, even fainter than the first, and drove deeper into the desert. Within half an hour they were lost in the sun-baked wilderness. When Pammy's head turned away for an instant he pulled the choke all the way out; the engine coughed and died.

"*Now* what is it?" Pammy shrilled, and for the first time there was a hint of panic in her voice.

It was hot work, but Gil had all the time in the world to work now, so he did not rush. He calmed her fears and inspected the engine. He told her it looked like the coil was bad, and carefully removed the good one and substituted the shorted coil that had been replaced in Texas. It was a very neat job, and when he finished he carefully wiped away all the dust and fingerprints. The good coil went into his pocket.

Now there was good reason why he could not start the car and he pushed the choke back in.

"Won't start," he finally said. "I'll have to walk back to the highway and stop a car, get some help. And take the jerrycan and bring some water for the engine. You want to come too?"

"I do not. You go and get back as fast as possible because I don't like this at all."

Just that easily she condemned herself to death.

There was of course no water—or anything else to drink—in the car. Pammy didn't want to, but Gil made her get out and look at the radiator, and showed her how to turn the drain-tap to get the water out. She was sure she wouldn't be that thirsty, but he said that you never could tell, and she should know there was water available. With a last wave of his hand he marched off and left her to die. The first thing he did when he was out of sight was brush away the tire tracks that led down the lost piece of road. Then he looked for a good spot to wait while she died.

It was foolproof. He had water, and she had none. There was no chance she would be accidentally found. The radiator water was thick with anti-freeze fluid — a deadly poison the magazine article had warned. And he would wait three days to be sure she drank some of it. Three days was as long as a person could live in this climate without water. He had his two quarts, which would just be fine.

From a nearby ridge he watched her, without adequate shade so that his skin was blistered and burned by the sun. It hurt but it was essential. At the end of the second day he saw her at the open hood of the car with what looked like a cup in her hand. This was good enough. He had no desire to see what followed. After finishing the last drops of water he buried the jerry-can and began to make his way back to the highway. Even with a map it was a difficult job and the panic ebbed away only when he had it in sight again. Three full days had passed before he buried the map and stumbled out onto the paved road. He was authentically dirty, sun burned and weak; his voice croaking when he talked to the police who picked him up. One of them spoke good English, and as soon as he had drunk some water they turned off into the side road. They knew the country well, and before dark had sighted the dark bulk of the car.

"Your wife will be alright, senor, do not fear," the policeman said. "If she was thirsty she could always drink the water in the radiator."

"No," Gil rasped. "There's anti-freeze in the water, had it put in in the mountains on the way down. Poison. I warned her not to drink it."

The policeman frowned. "We had better hurry," he said.

Through the open door they could see her slumped, limp body.

"She's dead!" Gil shouted, emotion tearing at his voice, though not quite the emotion the police thought he felt. He

was free at last!

"I am not dead," Pammy said, sitting up, forcing the words through cracked and dried lips. "And just where have you been? You certainly took your own time about coming back!"

"But the water . . .!" he gasped. "You drank the water from the radiator!"

"I certainly did not," she said. "One look at it was bad enough. All greasy and horrible. When you didn't come back I opened my cosmetic case and drank all my toilet water and cologne. We always did that at finishing school. It has a lot of alcohol and you can really get looped on it and it leaves your breath so sweet afterwards."

The policeman was looking at Gil when he asked Pammy the question. "Did you say, senora, that your husband *told* you to drink the radiator water?"

Gil didn't need Pammy's answering nod to tell him that it was all over. She would tell them the whole story and they would probably find the good coil and water can where he had buried them. Even if they didn't someone would explain the significance of what had happened to Pammy. He might be able to wriggle and lie his way out of being charged with attempted homicide or murder, but no amount of lies would ever convince Pammy once she understood.

Life was going to be very different.

Because he was never going to be rich again. Never, never again . . . . .

MR. ABDULLAH

Johannesburg newspapers reported, some years ago, the adventures of Detective Sergeant J. C. Grundlingh, undoubtedly the only South African detective (at least in pre-apartheid South Africa . . .) to wear a fez and dark glasses, a short black beard and a black mustache—and to do so on duty. Sergeant Grundlingh was attached to the Gold and Diamonds section of the C.I.D.—in plainclothes . . .

One day three natives were in court, accused of selling a "Mr. Abdullah" iron pyrites as gold. One of the accused was telling the court how "the Indian" had visited her home. "Which Indian?" asked the prosecutor. "That one . ." she replied, pointing to Grundlingh, waiting to testify—but not in fez and beard.

Some time earlier he'd spent nearly the whole day with several Europeans who were suspected of dealing in uncut diamonds. Finally, when it was getting dark, and he was satisfied that he had enough evidence, he identified himself as a police officer and arrested them. One of them protested, "Look here, Abdullah! You can't do this to us!" It took some time before they were convinced that he too was a "European" . . .

what's new in crime

by . . . Stefan Santesson

Richard and Frances Lockridge's warmly human and attractive FIRST COME, FIRST KILL (Lippincott, $2.95) is the story of Captain Heimrich's solution of a murder that takes place in front of his own house. Again you meet people — the kind of people we so often forget do exist — and it is very pleasant to spend some time with them; as usual, these are credible people, believable people, flesh-and-blood people.

Old Tom, self-appointed handyman for so many of Captain Heimrich's neighbors, is shot, and for a time—once Old Tom's identity is uncovered—there are surprisingly many suspects. But gradually, one by one, it is narrowed down to - - but I have no intention of proceeding any further! Don't miss this! You'll enjoy it!

And you will enjoy Erle Stanley Gardner's latest Perry Mason novel, THE CASE OF THE BLONDE BONANZA (Morrow, $2.95)—the story of the beautiful blonde who was eating five meals a day, unaware that there were other reasons for her assignment to do so than her "contact" indi-

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Mr. Santesson, editor of this magazine since 1956 and former editor, between 1945 and 1952, of the Unicorn Mystery Book Club, continues his column of comments on recent mystery and suspense novels and other material of interest to SMM readers.

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cated. Perry Mason's intervention—and what follows—adds up to a story told with Mr. Gardner's accustomed verve. Don't miss this!

Allan MacKinnon returns with CORMORANT'S ISLE (Doubleday, $3.50), the story of Alasdair Grant's framing for the kidnapping of the son of a Turkish political exile, and Grant's fight to clear his name —at one stage with the assistance of a very decorative young Norwegian. A completely credible and ably told look-see into the complicated thinking of the men for whom the kidnapped boy is never too important—except as a pawn. And pawns can be expendable . . . Do read this!

Pious hopes and well meaning writers to the contrary, all is yet to be well with the world. Too many people for whom "the frontiers of the mind" have a faintly suspect connotation continue to ignore the lessons of history and are intent only on the realization of their own dreams—and their own hates. Unwilling to recognize the reality that you cannot turn the clock back, many of these men—usually described as Neo-Nazis—plot, meet, rob, murder, and dream of the day when History will reward them. Martin Fallon's THE TESTAMENT OF CASPAR SCHULTZ (Abelard-Schuman, $2.95) describes some of these men and does so with a vividness which will perhaps prompt some to read their daily papers a shade more thoroughly.

Caspar Schultz had been sufficiently prominent in the Nazi hierarchy to know what Hitler's plans were for England and to know what so many people, on both sides of the Channel, had really thought in those days when the State that was to endure for a thousand years seemed, except to men like Canaris, all that Dr. Goebbels said . . . Caspar Schultz had written his memoirs — he'd called it his testament — and all over Germany, once this was known, there were men in the Nazi underground — and others — who were determined to get hold of the papers before the British agent, sent out to do likewise, made contact with Schultz' representative.

Some of the characters will seem, in retrospect, rather overdrawn, but Paul Chavasse, "French father, ex-university lecturer, a genius for languages" is however a very human professional. Chavasse insists that he is at heart a technician, and that he has more in common with his opposite number in the Russian secret service than he has with most men —or most women—and then, in the next moment, by his actions and by his emotions, he proves that this is far from so . . .

A recent article in a Swedish newspaper on the subject of how Texas millionaires live,

had this to say about their—and our . . . leisure reading habits . . .

"Americans are, after all, no book readers. A Gallup Poll in 1954 showed that 61% of all grown Americans never read a book—except, of course, the Bible. In 1958 it stood at 60%. And these upper-echelon Americans top this figure."

Any comment?

Brad Williams' thoroughly pleasant THE WELL-DRESSED SKELETON (Mill-Morrow, $2.95) starts off, at least so the jacket-blurb says, with dry bones grinning from the desert sands, and goes on to tell what happens to the screen writer, Chess Reames, and to Elizabeth Masters, who become involved in the unraveling of the mystery of the death, years earlier, of the girl whose skeleton he finds on the desert. This is a very pleasant novel. In addition to this it is unique because its Mexicans are people — not stereotypes, and because the author is obviously aware of and has considerable respect for the efficiency of the Mexican Secret Police. I think I can count on the fingers of one hand (you think of Fredric Brown and Dorothy Hughes, and then you pause) the writers who have written about "Mexicans" as people in the past. I am not ignoring the trend in the edge-of-doom fiction to describe with considerable empathy the men who have been caught up in one or another of the ways in which so many are exploited. When I talk about "Mexicans" I am not thinking of the hep ones, I am thinking of the "squares", of the men and the women who have dreams and hopes—and fears; who, in other words, *are* people. And it is out of the ranks of these people that the law-enforcement officers come who are described, in this novel, with honesty—and not in the usual manner. By all means do read Brad Williams' THE WELL-DRESSED SKELETON.

Patricia Moyes' DEATH ON THE AGENDA (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, $3.50) introduces us (if we have not read Mrs. Moyes' earlier novels) to Inspector Henry Tibbett of Scotland Yard who is representing England at a meeting in Geneva to discuss the control of illegal traffic in narcotics. The very human—and middle-aged—Inspector Tibbett is one of several police officers, from all over Europe and from the United States (I am afraid he isn't too credible . . .) who are meeting to discuss measures that can be taken to combat this traffic, and who soon have reason to believe that the influence of the narcotics lords is reaching right into the closed sessions of the Conference.

We are told by the publishers

that this is "a literate, sophisticated, intricately wrought 'whodunit'" and, in a sense, this may be so. There are some good moments in the novel, and Inspector Tibbett—and his wife—are both people whom you will wish to meet again.

Jerome Barry returns, after much too long an absence, with STRANGE RELATIONS (Doubleday, $3.50), the story of Den Marberry's rediscovery of values often neglected, and not only on Madison Avenue, when life becomes more and more hectic. Marberry is an extraordinarily dedicated advertising man, to the extent that nothing—neither wife nor home—seems more important than meeting that deadline. After an extremely hectic weekend on a Long Island estate, in the course of which an unpleasant young man is murdered and other unpleasant people are eventually frustrated, Den Marberry's views are considerably modified.

Luis Rodolfo Vicente Mendoza, in Dell Shannon's new novel, KNAVE OF HEARTS (Morrow, $2.95) seems even more incredible, even more larger - than - life, even more flamboyant than before, and nevertheless—if you can ignore the Freudian maunderings of all and sundry concerned, the forty-year old Homicide Lieutenant is almost likable; another few novels, and he may even be credible!

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murder masquerade

by . . . Lawrence Treat

Double trouble in a New Orleans Mardi Gras

I've been to New Orleans once, since it happened. The dignified old hotel is still there, of course, with its dim, spacious lobbies and its antique furnishings. The azaleas still bloom in March and the trolleys still rumble the length of Royal Street; but the little costumer winces when he sees me, and the police, if they notice me at all, ignore me.

I was younger then. I was an accountant with the firm of Shattuck & Irish in Trenton, and I had a two-week vacation and was spending it in the old South. I'd read the tourist brochures describing New Orleans and its famous Mardi Gras and I'd eaten them up, to every last detail. I'd come to find romance and mystery. And the mystery was there, as promised; but the tourist folders had forgotten to say that for me, Robert Praeger, it marched arm in arm with murder.

I arrived in the evening, at the old L. & N. station near the waterfront. As I stepped to the platform I smelt the river, just

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Lawrence Treat, author of the thoroughly delightful VENUS UNARMED (Doubleday) (reviewed in our June 1962 issue) and of many other novels, here tells the story of a young man who has come down to New Orleans at Mardi Gras time and soon has reason to laugh hollowly at the posters which claim you can "rest and relax in Colorful Old New Orleans."

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a few yards away. I caught a glimpse of the towering white fancywork of a river boat. I had an impulse to toss my suitcase aside and walk over there, to the levee. I'd travelled 1500 miles to see it.

But I was hungry and wanted dinner. I caught sight of the glare of lights on Canal Street and saw the taxi line. I walked over and gave the name of my hotel, the old St. Charles.

The next morning I was up early. I felt that the world was mine. I had a neat little black moustache, a full month old, and I wore it like a veteran. When people looked at me, I was b a r e l y conscious of my adornment.

The hotel clerk, Robert Beaufort, was about my own age and was eager to give me all the information I wanted. There was to be a torchlight parade in t h e evening, ending in a masked ball at the Municipal A u d i t o r i u m. Only the old Creole families, he said, were allowed to attend. They had formed Mardi Gras Clubs, called Krewes, and each Krewe gave a parade and a ball during the festivities that were climaxed in Mardi Gras itself. Outsiders were never permitted to join. E v e n friends of the Krewe members could get no nearer than a balcony seat. If I wanted one, Beaufort hinted, he might be able to arrange it. He gave me the impression that he was doing me a tremendous favour and was violating the m o s t sacred of rules, and I forked over, accordingly.

I made my phone call next. A mutual friend had told me to get in touch with a Miss Cornelia Clavier. She came from old French stock and she k n e w everyone. She could show me the real New Orleans, he'd said, and added that she was young and charming.

She was cordial the moment I mentioned my friend's name.

"I'm giving a party on Mardi Gras day," she said, "in the afternoon, right after the parade. You must come, and you must come masked. Everybody does."

I thrilled to the idea. The obliging Beaufort gave me the address of Givot, the costumer, and I tucked it in my pocket and went forth.

I spent all that day seeing the sights. In the morning I took a bus that traversed the heart of the French quarter. A guide pointed out the old houses and told us their stories. We stopped at the museum and at the Cathedral Saint Louis. We d r o v e out on t h e broad boulevard and saw the gardens, parks and mansions.

I had a quick bite at an o y s t e r bar, washed it down with a glass of beer and headed for the river. Nothing in the world could have kept me off the paddle-wheeler. I climbed every deck and had to be chased off the companionway to the bridge. I leaned over the rail and watched the muddy water

of the Mississippi sweep by, and felt as if all my life had been pointing towards this moment. I stared at the wharves of the riverfront and watched the banana conveyors unloading fruit from the holds of ships in the Central American trade. I was happy, excited and carefree.

I was hurrying along the deck to get a better view of one of the old plantation houses when I stopped suddenly, attracted by a small oyster boat. As I whirled, I caught sight of a big man with a large, hairless face. He was wearing a grey hat and he was staring at me.

I forgot all about the oyster boat. I'd seen the big man before, somewhere, and at first I thought he was going to speak. Instead, he turned away and lowered his head in order to light a cigarette. His hand, cupping the match, concealed his face. With the first puff of smoke he swung leisurely and ambled off.

The deliberate way in which he had shielded his features bothered me. I had the impression that I'd seen him earlier in the day and that he had followed me.

But that was obviously nonsense. Why should I, a young accountant on a holiday, be followed through the streets of New Orleans? I had a few dollars with me, but so did thousands of other tourists. I wasn't wealthy and I didn't look it. My appearance was normal. I was just a young man with his first moustache, slim of build, bright-eyed and eager and talking to everybody I came across.

As for being followed—I was imagining things.

From the boat I went straight to a restaurant. I had a leisurely dinner. By the time I had finished, the torchlight parade was almost due. I took Beaufort's advice and sought a place on the balcony-covered sidewalk of Royal Street, near the point where the line of march turned at right angles.

Waiting there, I looked for the big man with the large, smooth, hairless face. I didn't see him. And yet, I was unaccountably worried.

Then I heard music in the distance and saw the approaching glare of the torches. A half-dozen negroes, white-garbed and hooded, carrying flaming poles, marched briskly past. Behind them rode a medieval horseman, his face impassive behind a mask. A whole army of torchbearers came next, and in their midst was the first float.

It was a silly, fantastic thing, all tinsel and gold, depicting some allegorical scene. I remember the cardboard crowns and the imitation ermine, and the dead-pan masks of the figures aboard. They were tossing souvenirs to the crowd: candies, caramels, cheap little trinkets. The crowd loved it.

When the next float rolled

by, I dived for one of the souvenirs. It was a gaudy little necklace of glass beads, two-for-a-nickel at the dime store. It hit a post behind me, bounced away and I went scrambling for it. Someone else made a dive at the same time, but I got there first and scooped it up. The necklace, however, had broken.

I saw him, then. Or rather, he detached himself from the crowd and I saw his shadow, big and overbearing, weaving in the uncertain light of the torches.

I remember that for a second or two, in some queer trick of acoustics or in some momentary absence of ordinary sound, I heard the tinkle of the beads, dropping senselessly and daintily to the pavement.

Immediately afterwards, noise closed in again, I put the beads in my pocket, stood up and saw him. He was not more than three feet away. One hand was buried in his pocket, the other was raised and hidden inside his coat, under the armpit. His eyes were dark, quiet and serious. They were fixed on me, expressionless, not menacing, but just watching.

I stood up slowly. He didn't speak. He made no effort to stop me and he gave no sign of recognition. There was just the empty stare, as empty and as immovable as the masks on the floats that were passing by. I shuddered and pulled up my collar. It took a tremendous effort of will for me to turn and start walking along Royal Street.

I still had no idea what could be behind this. All that had happened was that a big man had looked at me. And so I moved off, and the hair on my neck seemed to stand up and my spine tingled. I slid through the dense throng, making my way slowly, and at the end of a block I turned around. He was ten feet away from me.

I burrowed into the crowd, as if the physical contact with others would pull me out of my bad dream. I buttoned my coat more tightly. A few people glanced at me. It was hot here and everybody else was warm.

I stood still, no longer reaching for the souvenirs that were being tossed out in increasing quantities. One of them hit my hat, bounced to my shoulder and dropped to the ground. I didn't even bother to stoop.

I didn't use my ticket to the ball. Beaufort would ask me in the morning how I'd liked it, and I'd have to pretend I had gone or else invent an excuse to explain my absence. But that didn't worry me. All I was interested in now was getting back to my hotel.

When the last float had gone by, the crowd broke up and swarmed into the centre of the street. There was no traffic. I walked steadily, pausing twice. The first time, I stopped to glance in a shop window whose plate glass was set at :

peculiar angle. In the crude reflection of the glass I could see the big, sombre man. He, too, had stopped.

The second time, I went into a brightly lighted cafe' and ordered a glass of beer. I drank half of it, paid and went out. The sombre man was outside, waiting. As I headed for the hotel, he fell into step. The last I saw of him was through the closing door of the elevator. I was going upstairs, to my room on the second floor; he was approaching the desk.

I reached my room, stepped inside and double-locked the door. I even s t o o d a chair against the knob. I did not turn on the lights. Instead, I sat down on the bed and tried to decide what it was all about.

What had I done, unwittingly or otherwise? I racked my brains for some i n c i d e n t, scarcely noticed at the time, which might have a n n o y e d someone or given cause for anger. I could think of nothing. To whom had I spoken on the train? Dozens of people, but to everyone casually, innocently. What accounts had I gone over, back in Trenton before I'd left? What could I somehow have learned from them? Nothing. I didn't know.

So I sat there in my locked darkened room, and trembled.

After a long time I walked over to the curtained window and drew aside the two strips of silk. Through the slit I could see an alleyway at the side of the hotel. I'd noticed it that morning, and had thought it was quaint and picturesque. But I didn't think so now. Not when I saw him there, big and sombre, standing near a packing case, watching.

I was panic-stricken then. He must have found out my room number from the clerk. But why? What did he want? And in any case, what could I do about it? Go to the police? They would think I was mad.

Then, as I watched from behind my slit of curtain, he stepped back. A swirl of vapour rose up from the damp street and enveloped him, like the cold exudation of melting snow.

I kept staring at him. His image, w r e a t h e d in that strange, eerie mist, is as clear to me today as it was at that moment. I can still hear the clang of a streetcar bell, dull and flat, coming from the direction of the avenue. I can still see him look down and start to stoop, as if he were about to tighten his shoe-lace.

He never did. There was a sharp report. Near the mouth of the alley, a little ball of flame, red in the centre and bluish at the edges, danced momentarily and lit up a shadowy figure. Dark and liquid, the figure dissolved in the deeper shadows of the alley. The stolid man staggered and fell back.

It took me seconds to grasp what had happened to him, and even longer to believe it. I was transfixed.

His large eyes were open, gazing upward and reflecting the glint of the stars. His body, draped over the packing case, was bent back at an impossible angle.

Grimly, with an effort, I turned away from the window and walked over to the phone. I asked for the police and told them that a man had been shot.

When they knocked at my door, I opened it at once. Two uniformed men and a detective in plain clothes were standing outside. The detective studied me for a moment; then his eyes narrowed and he yanked out his gun.

"All right," he snapped. "Put 'em up."

"Me?" I said. "What for?"

"Just do what I tell you."

Slowly, in perplexity, I raised my arms. One of the patrolmen frisked me and I stepped back and lowered my hands.

"Better look through the joint," ordered the detective. "I want to see what he's got."

The two cops started to search my bureau drawers and my suitcase. I watched in amazement.

"What are you looking at my stuff for?" I asked. "I was decent enough to phone you, and I ought to get thanks instead of this kind of treatment."

"Yeah? How'd you happen to know about it, if you're so innocent?"

"This is ridiculous," I said. "I had nothing to do with the dead man. I don't know him and had no reason for killing him and never even saw—"

I broke off abruptly. I could not tell how I'd been followed. I wanted none of the dead man, but I could see how the police would figure. Obviously I had had the opportunity. It would have been easy for me to shoot through the window and then call the police and pretend innocence. And if I admitted that the man had followed me, told how he'd asked about me at the desk and had constituted some kind of threat to me, then, fantastic as it seemed, they would have the beginning of a case. And so, I shut up.

The detective went through routine questions and listened with a smirk while I answered. My name, occupation, what I was doing in New Orleans; when I'd arrived, what I'd done, whom I'd seen. There wasn't much to ask. He went through it briefly, and then loaded me into a police wagon and hustled me over to Headquarters. There, to my mystification and over my protests, I was fingerprinted and photographed. And then the questioning started all over again.

A big, burly lieutenant took charge. "What's your name?" he began.

"Robert Praeger. Trenton New Jersey."

"Got any identification?"

I smiled wearily. The detective who had taken me from my room had gone into that

and I knew precisely what to say.

"Yes. Plenty. My driver's licence, an insurance card, business cards, a couple of letters in my name. My employers are Shattuck & Irish, Trenton. My suitcase has my initials on it, my handkerchiefs are initialed and my shirts have an identifying laundry mark." I took out my wallet and handed it to him. "The cards are in here."

He glanced at them perfunctorily. "They prove there is somebody by that name," he drawled, "but how do I know it's you?"

"Call Shattuck & Irish. I just told you."

"Got a photograph?"

"Of course not."

"That's tough on you," he remarked. "Anybody in New Orleans know you?"

"No, not well. I'm a tourist. I'm just visiting." I took a deep breath. "If I'm not Robert Praeger, who am I?"

"You tell me," said the Lieutenant. "I want to hear it from you."

"I'm Robert Praeger. Berkeley Street, Trenton."

"Who's the guy that got bumped?"

"I don't know."

"Who do you think he is?"

"I haven't the least idea."

It went on like that. The Lieutenant kept asking the same questions in different words, but there was no way of convincing him. I was tired and annoyed and it seemed to me that he just liked to ask questions, the same ones over and over again, without listening to the answers, without hope, without fatigue. Just questions, questions. . .

He had been at me for about two hours, talking in the same dogged, monotonous voice, when the door opened and a small chubby man with curly hair and small grey eyes bounced in. He was Detective Richard Creighton.

He looked sleepy and irritable. He had been hauled out of bed at one in the morning and he resented it.

"Hello, Granger," he said to the Lieutenant. "This him?"

The Lieutenant nodded. "Yeah. Says he's a tourist. Had a room on the second floor. We couldn't find the gun, but he could have shot him easy. Even the angle was right."

I blinked at that one. Then I remembered how the sombre man had looked down at his feet, just before he'd been shot. The bullet had entered the top of his head. No wonder the police thought it had come from my window.

Creighton glanced at me as if I were a prize pig. "Hello, Joe," he said.

I didn't answer. He stepped forward and studied me.

"Take off your shirt," he said irritably.

I didn't move. I had visions of a rubber hose, which leaves no marks.

"Come on," he ordered. "Take

it off before I rip it off."

I wanted to hit him. He made no attempt to conceal his annoyance and he gazed steadily at me, with cold eyes.

"What for?" I demanded.

He moved forward, grabbed my arm and twisted it. I cried out and he loosened his grip. I knew then that I'd better not food around with him. I took off my coat, my tie, my shirt and undershirt.

Creighton simply stared, gazing at my bare shoulder as if this were the first time in his life he had seen anything like it.

"You say your name's Praeger?" he began.

"Yes."

"You're lucky," he said. "You're lucky you're alive. I'm going to tell you something."

At that moment the door swung open and a cop looked in.

"Creighton?" he called. "The Captain wants to see you."

"O.K.," said the detective. "I'll be right out."

"He says it's about the Maguida case."

"Oh." Creighton looked at me. "Wait here. I'll be back." He went briskly out of the room. The Lieutenant followed and slammed the door. I was alone.

I waited. Five long minutes went by. I peeped outside and saw a wide, dingy corridor with a bank of elevators and an old-fashioned staircase at the far end. I could have walked right out of the place and gone home to bed, but I knew I'd better not.

I heard a phone ring in a near-by room. Then I heard steps in the hallway and my door was flung open. A tired, elderly officer said, "Are you Praeger?"

"Yes."

"Phone call. It's Creighton and he says he's in a hurry."

I followed the cop into an anteroom with a desk and a row of wooden filing cabinets. A telephone stood on the desk. The receiver was off the hook and I picked it up.

"Hello," I said.

"Praeger?" Creighton's voice sounded impatient. "Look—I'm in a rush. No time to explain. You're free. Go back to your hotel, but stay there tomorrow. All day. Don't go out."

"Why?" I demanded angrily. "What for? Who was killed and how do I come in and why should I stay home?"

"Because—" He broke off, and spoke to someone else. "O.K. Captain. Be right with you." Then, to me, he said, "Look, Praeger, I haven't time to explain now. Just stick in your room till you hear from me. I'll get in touch, but do what I say. It's important."

The phone clicked and I hung up, still puzzled. The elderly officer walked over to a water cooler. I went out.

Back at my hotel, I undressed and tumbled into bed. I was exhausted and didn't wake up until noon.

There was a telegram underneath my door. I picked it up and read it. It said:

WHAT'S UP. NEW ORLEANS POLICE PHONED ME FOR YOUR DESCRIPTION AND HABITS. AM CURIOUS. WHAT DO THEY WANT AND WHAT DID YOU DO. SHATTUCK.

I stepped to the window and looked outside. The alley was still there, but the packing case and the body were gone. I wondered whether this was one of those weird, rumoured cases in which the police conspired to wipe out all traces of a crime, for reasons which are never divulged to the ordinary man.

I ordered a paper and glanced through it rapidly. It was filled with Mardi Gras pictures, but buried in a back page was a small, inconspicuous item to the effect that an unidentified man had been shot to death in an alley off St. Charles Avenue. There was no mention of me.

I dressed and had something to eat in the hotel dining-room. Creighton had told me to stay in my room, and doubtless he had good reasons. But if I stayed, I wouldn't have a costume, and if I didn't have a costume, I couldn't go to the Clavier party.

The address of Givot, the costumer, was only a few blocks from the hotel. The streets were crowded. If I was in danger—and I knew that I still was—nothing could happen on these busy thoroughfares. I'd pick up my costume and come back. Tomorrow I'd be masked and no one would know who I was.

I'd only gone a half-block before I knew I was being followed again. I picked out my shadow. He was a small, inconspicuous man, young, pleasant-looking. He wandered along aimlessly, and yet when I stopped, he stopped too, and when I hurried, he managed to keep me in sight.

I thought of turning around and facing him. And then, suddenly, I realized that I had no cause for alarm. On the contrary. The police themselves were following me. They were giving me protection.

Jauntily, gaily, I went straight to the costume shop on the side street. I walked inside and said affably, "I'd like a costume."

The clerk replied, "Of course. I have it for you." He went to the back of the shop and returned with a green outfit, which he proceeded to wrap up. "I'm sure it will fit," he said. "It's practically new, and it's the only one of its kind we have. Five dollars, please."

I handed him the money, took the package and went out. Only after I was in the street did it occur to me that his behavior had been strange. He had acted almost as if he'd been expecting me.

Well, I had my costume and

that was all that mattered. I spotted my shadow again. More to be annoying than for any other reason, I hailed a cruising taxi, jumped in and directed the driver to the hotel. Out of the back window I saw the man shrug and give up. If I wanted to take the only cab in sight, that was my business. He had done his best, and he would merely state the facts in his report. I was free. I went out immediately and stayed out, but I was not followed.

The next day was Mardi Gras. I dressed carefully in my green tights, green jacket and green hat. The costume fitted me nicely. The green silk mask bothered me at first, but after a few minutes I got used to it. I had breakfast in solitary splendour and went forth. The parade had already started.

It was a bright, sunny day and the streets were jammed. A long line of motor-driven floats wound their way down St. Charles Avenue, turned into Canal and headed for the auditorium. The floats depicted anything and everything that whim could think up. There were pirates, clowns, elves and knights. Many of them had bands, and on all of them there was drinking. The result was gay and raucous.

I wandered about as I pleased. Canal Street, t w e l v e lanes broad, was jammed from kerb to kerb. There was music on several street corners and my mask and costume made me welcome everywhere. I danced with milkmaids and countesses and Columbines. I ate at hot-dog stands and had the time of my life. Nobody knew me and nobody bothered me, and late that afternoon I went to the Clavier party.

There, too, the holiday spirit was rampant, and it was dusk when I left. I was keyed up and decided to walk back to the hotel along Baronne Street. The name appealed to me. I was still wearing my mask, and was wondering what I'd do for the rest of the evening. I had been invited to the Claviers' for dinner the next day. Until then, I had no obligations.

I didn't notice the car that was parked a half-block from the Clavier house. I didn't hear it start up and I don't know whether it followed me at once or whether it waited until I reached a deserted stretch. All I know is that it pulled softly alongside and slowed to a snail's pace. It kept abreast of me for a few feet. Then I looked at it.

I saw the guns and I stopped short. The car stopped, too. A door punched open and a harsh, grating voice rasped at me.

"All right—get in!"

I glanced at the open door. There were two men inside and two guns. One of them was a sub-machine-gun and the other a blue-barrelled automatic.

I tried to speak and couldn't. My knees wobbled and my heart was hammering so hard that I

thought I'd keel over. I staggered towards the car, trying to speak, to explain who I was, and unable to utter more than an unintelligible whisper. And at the kerb, strong hands grabbed me and hauled me inside. The car started with a jerk that flung me back against the cushions. Hands frisked me rapidly and roughly, from my shoe tops to my shoulders. When I opened my mouth to protest, a hand slapped my face and a voice told me to shut up.

I saw it now. The sombre man hadn't been alone. He had followed me, menaced me, and now that he had been killed, there were others. But why? Why?

I examined my captors. There were three of them. Under the intermittent glow of street lights, I saw that the driver was the one who had followed me to the costumer's, the day before.

What a fool I'd been! He'd merely asked Givot what costume I'd rented, and Givot had told him. All day long I must have been a marked man. Me in my Robin Hood costume, with the green mask! I'd been unique, the only one of my kind in New Orleans. But—why? What had they against me?

Again I started to ask, and again I got a slap in the face. After that I shut up. An automatic was pressed against my side and a submachine-gun was rammed against my abdomen. The muscles of my stomach started to twitch. For weeks afterwards, they jerked unaccountably.

I turned slowly and looked at my unwanted hosts. The one they called Barney, and the one they called Hank.

Barney was a gaunt, hard-faced man who handled the gun he held with a nervous impatience that sent cold chills down my spine, and his grey-green eyes glittered with the bright, fevered intensity of a narcotic addict.

The man on the other side of me held the machine-gun. Its very motionlessness was what made my stomach jump. The man seemed to have no nerves, no warmth, no feeling. He was as mechanical as the gun itself. In the reflection of passing lights, I could see his eyes set deep in his face. And I knew that he hated me.

I tried not to look at those eyes, and yet I kept returning to them.

The car drove across the city, keeping off the main streets and heading for the broad, open fields that divide the city from Lake Pontchartrain.

Suddenly Hank, the smaller man, said, "Take that mask off." With trembling fingers, I pulled off the green silk mask and stuck it in my pocket.

The light was dim and there was little illumination from the empty streets. Hank leaned forward and stared at me, six inches away. He frowned, and for an instant his glance wav-

ered. Then he cried out in a sharp, high-pitched voice, "Jeez —we got the wrong guy!"

Instantly the car slowed down. Barney snapped on a flashlight and pointed it at my face. "Holy angels!" he exclaimed.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," I said frantically. "Let me go!"

Barney moved his gun from my side. The driver scowled.

"I'll be damned," he said.

"Let me out!" I repeated.

But Hank stared coldly and kept the sub-machine-gun exactly where it had been all the time. "No," he said.

"Look," rumbled Barney. "We don't want to bump him. What for?"

"Because we can't let him loose," said Hank. "He goes straight to the cops and describes us. Then where are we?"

"I won't go near the cops," I said. "I promise."

"Shut up!" snapped Hank. Then he turned to the driver. "Tony, you followed the wrong guy."

Tony shook his head. "I saw him. They look alike, but it was him—not this guy. He limped a little. He got out of a cab and ordered that costume. When I tried to trail him, he gave me the slip. I went into the store and asked about it. I told you. The guy in the store said it was the Robin Hood costume and he didn't have no others like it. He said it was in the name of Thompson. Thompson — that's the monicker he always uses."

"It wasn't me," I said, "I must have gotten the costume by mistake. Let me go. I'll do anything you say."

I remembered how the little costumer had been expecting me. Of course, he'd mistaken me for this Thompson. He had said the costume was ready and that it would fit.

"How do we know you won't go to the cops?" demanded Hank. "Just on account you say it, we're supposed to believe you, huh?"

Tony stopped the car and said, "I don't want to bump him. I feel like Barney does."

"You punk!" retored Hank. "Don't you see it? We can't take no chances. And if we knock him off, there's no reason in the world why any copper will ever think of us. We don't even know the guy."

My lips were dry and my throat parched. To die because of an accident? To die because I had the wrong face and looked like someone else?

I thought of all the tricks I'd ever heard about and read about. They were silly. I could not grab a machine-gun and I couldn't run three feet before getting killed.

I stared at them. Hank, cold, relentless, cruel. Barney, stupid and brutal. Tony, smiling now, agreeing with Hank, not caring whether I lived or died.

Something within me stiffened. I had been scared out of

my wits. Sure, who wouldn't be? But if I was going to get killed, I was damned if I'd die like a coward.

"Get out of the car," ordered Hank, "and then walk up in front of the headlights."

I obeyed. My knees were stiff, but I held my head up. I took two steps forward, and then Hank snapped at me.

"Hold it," he said. "Wait till that car goes by."

I turned slightly. I was on the edge of the road. Headlights were coming down the highway, headed in the same direction as we were. The car would pass in the centre of the road and probably the driver wouldn't even see me. The gangsters' sedan would be between him and me.

And if I yelled? Then the machine-gun would cut me down, and maybe the driver, too.

The car approached at high speed. Then, suddenly, there was a squeal of brakes and it slowed down. I caught a glimpse of the driver, of his flaming red hair, his distended nostrils and his broad upper lip. Then the earth exploded.

I dropped down, and the gangsters' sedan protected me from the bullets that ripped down its occupants. Hank tumbled head first through the open door, with the tommy gun pinned underneath him. Tony dropped out of sight. Barney slumped forward and no longer struggled to breathe. And from the other car, the redheaded man began cursing.

I grabbed Hank's gun, lifted it and pressed the trigger. The gun jerked and pounded at my chest, but in a blind frenzy, in my fear and tension and anger and hate, I sprayed everything and every object within range.

I didn't aim, because I didn't know how. I merely pressed the trigger and hung on to the gun. My bullets went wild. Some of them hit the car, but the rest of them dropped harmlessly on the fields.

With my first burst, the other car slammed into gear and raced away. I dropped my gun. And then, wildly, I began running.

When I saw the lights of a diner, I slowed up. I was still wearing my Robin Hood costume. I dusted off my tights, smoothed my jacket and set my hat at a jaunty angle, then I walked into the diner.

"Coffee," I said, "and doughnuts."

The counterman stared at me. Two truck drivers looked at me and grunted. I stared sullenly. I hadn't tried to figure anything out. I didn't know why I was here or what I was going to do. Only one fact concerned me. I was alive.

I had to lift my coffee cup with both hands to keep it from spilling. I stuffed half the doughtnut in my mouth in one bite. The counterman walked away from me and turned up the radio. A crooner was just

finishing his song. A short commercial followed, and then a different voice broke in.

"Flash! There has just been a gang killing, out in the Gentilly section. Three gangsters were shot to death with a machine-gun. A man, possibly masked and said to be dressed in a green Robin Hood costume, was seen running away. He is probably dark-haired, with a thin face and a small, dark moustache. We will interrupt this programme again when we have further news."

Then the crooner went at it again.

I looked at the counterman. He was studiously avoiding me, but he was trying to signal something to one of the truck drivers, who got up, glanced at the wall phone in the corner and then at me.

I made up my mind at once. I put down my coffee cup, marched over to the phone and asked for the police. I told them where I was and that I was the man in the Robin Hood costume. Then I sat down again. The three men turned away from me. None of them spoke. I ordered another cup of coffee and the counterman set it down in front of me and withdrew.

Detective Creighton led the police party. He had a drawn gun and he burst into the diner with a couple of cops immediately behind, protecting him.

"You!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "I thought I told you to stay home."

"Yes," I answered, "but you didn't tell me why. I like reasons."

"Know anything about that shooting?" he demanded.

"Rather. I was there."

"Come on outside," he said.

He sat down in the police car and I slid in next to him. He was brief and to the point.

"Ever hear of John Torrini?" he asked.

I nodded. "I read something about him. He's a gangster who broke out of some state penitentiary, isn't he? He shot a guard on his way out."

"Right. He used to operate in this vicinity. Gas station hold-ups. His gang comes from around here. They all turned State's evidence and got light sentences, and they're out now, but Torrini was put away for life. He swore he'd get his former gang, every single one of them. Ever since he escaped, we've been waiting for him to show up."

Creighton stroked his cheek thoughtfully. "He looks like you—amazingly like you. I doubt whether anyone who knew him well would make the mistake, but police, identifying from a photograph only, might easily think you were Torrini. In fact, the night before last, they did. They figured that Torrini's gang were out to get him, in self-protection, and that he was out to get them, in revenge. When Podak was found in the alleyway, it was assumed that he'd been killed by Tor-

rini, because he was one of his gang. Since you looked like Torrini, you were held. I happened to know, however, that Torrini had an old bullet wound on his shoulder, one that I gave him." Creighton stared at me and smiled. "That's why I asked you to take your shirt off."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?"

"I tried to, but there wasn't time. Another case broke wide open and I've been on it ever since. Hardly got any sleep. Now tell me exactly what happened tonight."

He listened without interruption to my account until I reached my description of the red-headed man. Then he exploded.

"That's Torrini, all right!" he exclaimed. "With his hair dyed. Just a minute, Praeger."

He got out of the car, walked over to one of the officers and gave orders in a low voice. As he started back, I heard the cop broadcasting the new description over the two-way radio.

Creighton sat down again. "We picked up the car Torrini used," he said, "and we have all the roads blocked. He knows that as well as we do. The chances are he'll hole up for a while. Maybe he'll keep the red hair and maybe he won't."

"Do you think you'll get him?" I asked.

"We'll get him, all right," said Creighton grimly. "What I'm worried about is you. I want you out of town and out of danger."

I was on the train that left for the North on the following morning. I had a through Pullman ticket in my pocket and enough excitement stored up to last me the rest of my life.

I was tired and at first I tried to sleep, but I was too keyed up. I leaned back in my seat and watched the scenery.

The train sped through drab outlying districts, crossed a couple of small waterways and reached a region of low, flat marshlands. There it slowed down and stopped with a jerk. The short, chubby man in the seat ahead of me said something about a washout. A dining-car steward opened the door and came through the car.

"Last call for breakfast," he called. "Dining car to the rear."

I looked up automatically and my stomach turned to ice. Striding a couple of paces behind the steward, scanning the passengers with sharp, piercing eyes was Torrini. His hair was no longer red and there was a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles astride his nose. But I knew him. I'd never met anyone else who looked so much like me.

At sight of me, he halted and stood there blinking. Then, after a quick look behind him, he edged over and slunk into the seat next to me.

"Where the hell are you going?" he asked.

I didn't answer. He glared sullenly and went on in a low, flat voice that barely carried more than a foot or two.

"Listen jerk," he said. "If this is a trick, it won't work. Because the first thing I'm gonna do is plug you." He patted the bulge of a gun, which was stuck in his waistline, underneath his shirt.

I shook my head. "It's no trick. I'm trying to get away. That's all I want."

"Pipe down," he said, barely moving his lips. "Not so loud."

Under other circumstances I might have l a u g h e d. The chubby man was sitting in front of me. Across the aisle was an elderly lady and just beyond sat a young couple, so engrossed in themselves that they fairly yelled honeymoon. And he, Torrini the killer—*he* was afraid.

But his fear was nothing compared to mine. I squeezed into my corner. My fingers were icy and I wanted to uncross my legs and couldn't. They felt paralyzed.

The train started to move again. I saw a canal and a small houseboat and a couple of grey, dingy launches. I saw a shack on stilts with a big sign painted across the roof. I read, "Live Bait."

"Listen," said Torrini. "Next stop we're getting off. The two of us, see? At Gulfport. You stick close to me and do what you're told. You want to stay healthy, don't you?"

I didn't speak. He prodded me with his thumb. "Answer me, jerk. You want to stay healthy, huh?"

"Yes," I said.

"I wouldn't of thought they'd get us mixed up. But if guys like Hank and Barney couldn't tell us apart, the cops won't, either."

I didn't tell him that Hank and Barney had realized their mistake as soon as I'd taken my mask off. I simply stared at the chubby little man ahead and prayed that he'd turn around and realize what was wrong.

But there was no way he could know. I turned away from him. The train was creeping across a trestle. There was a long curve and I could see we were approaching a small station. That would be Bay Saint Louis. I remembered the name from the timetable.

The t r a i n kept crawling along jerkily. Presently, with a hiss of air brakes, it halted at the station.

Torrini didn't move. "We ain't supposed to stop here," he said. "There must be something the matter with the engine."

He stared out of the window, frowning and probably wondering whether to get out here or wait until we reached Gulfport. He wanted to kill me and take my clothes. Then he'd continue his trip as Robert Praeger. I shuddered.

I heard the door open and I looked up. I caught a momentary glimpse of Creighton's s q u a r e shoulders and light, curly hair. I gasped.

Torrini gripped my arm and snarled. "What's the matter?" he demanded.

I pointed out of the window. "Look!" I exclaimed. "Cops!"

Torrini's eyes followed my gesture. "Where? I don't see nothing."

I kept pointing. "There—behind the station."

Then he saw Creighton and two officers striding towards us, through the length of the car.

"You—" snapped Torrini, and reached for his gun. At the same time he tried to swing me in front of him, to use as a shield. But I was the same weight as he and he couldn't throw me around. He got me half off my feet, but no further. I slammed my elbow back with all my strength.

Torrini swore. I lunged again, frantically, with quick, vicious jabs, hoping to keep him from his gun. But he shot his knee up and catapulted me forward, against the seat. I banged my head and tried to duck out of the way.

Creighton yelled and dived past me. I saw the hulk of his body and the glint of light on his gun as he swept it down in a long, murderous arc. It struck with a crunch. A woman began screaming and then I turned slowly and raised my head.

Creighton was standing there, with his clubbed gun raised and ready to deliver another blow. But he didn't have to. Torrini was crumpled helplessly across the seat.

Creighton raised his voice. "All right, everybody—stay in your seats. We want room to get him out of here."

Nobody obeyed. The two cops bent down, snapped handcuffs on Torrini's wrists and then half-dragged and half-carried him through the crowded car. Creighton sat down and wiped his forehead.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "That was a close one! If you hadn't tackled him, it would have been tough. Never could have risked a shot in this mob."

"Thanks," I blurted out. "Thanks. Gee! But tell me—how did you happen to get here?"

"We were watching the New Orleans station and one of our men saw Torrini sneak aboard at the last second. We ordered the train to slow up and stop here for us. Perfectly simple."

He stood up and smiled. We shook hands, while the crowd pressed in on us and gaped and asked questions. Then Creighton elbowed his way through.

Immediately everybody descended on me. Through the avalanche I picked out the chubby man. He was handing me something and saying, "I think you must have dropped it."

I took it. It was a travel folder. It bore a picture of the cathedral underneath a brief, inviting slogan: "Rest and Relax in Colourful Old New Orleans."

(Continued from other side)

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